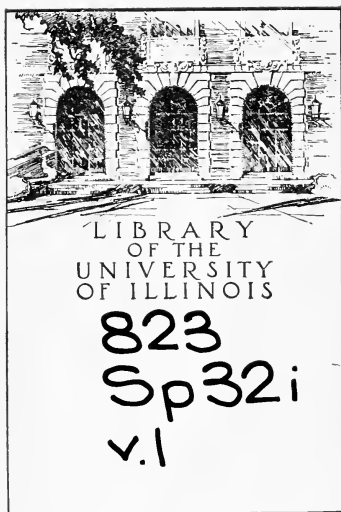


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IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON.

1874.

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IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

OVER THE CLIFF.



HOT, windless August day had settled down into a dull, brooding evening, presageful of a coming storm. It was nearly dark by the time Lionel Dering was ready to turn his face homeward. The tide was coming in with an ominous muffled roar; the wind, unfelt all day, was now blowing in fitful puffs from various points of the compass, so that the weathercock on the green, in front of the Silver Lion, was more undecided than usual, and did not know its own mind for two minutes at a time. The

boatmen were busy with their tiny craft, making everything fast for the night; and the bathing men were dragging their machines high and dry beyond reach of the incoming tide. Many of the excursionists—those with families chiefly—were already making their way towards the railway station; but others there were who seemed bent on keeping up their merriment to the last moment. These latter could be seen through the wide-open windows of the Silver Lion, footing it merrily on the club-room floor, to the music of two wheezy fiddles. A few minutes later there comes a warning whistle from the engine. The music stops suddenly; the country-dance is left unfinished; pipes are laid aside; glasses are quickly emptied; and the lads and lasses, with many a shout and burst of laughter, rush helter-skelter across the green, to find their places in the train.

“We shall have a rough night, Ben,” said Mr. Dering to a man who was coming up from the beach.

“Yes, sir, there’s a storm brewin’ fast,”

answered Ben, carrying a finger to his forehead. "If I was you, Mr. Dering," he added, "I wouldn't go over the cliffs to-night. It ain't safe after dark, and the storm 'll break afore you get home." But Mr. Dering merely shook his head, laughed, bade Ben good-night, and kept on his way.

The old boatman's words proved true. The first flash of lightning came just as the last houses of Melcham were lost to view behind a curve of the road, and when Lionel had two miles of solitary walking still before him. The thunder and the rain, however, were still far out at sea.

By this time it was almost dark, but Mr. Dering pressed forward without hesitation or delay. The cliff road, dangerous as it would have been under such circumstances to any ordinary wayfarer, had for him no terrors. He knew every yard of it as well as he knew the walk under the apple-trees in his own garden. It was not the first time by any means that he had traversed it after night-fall. As for the lightning, it was rather an

assistance than otherwise, serving every two or three minutes, as it did, to show him exactly where he was. It was a bad road enough, certainly. Unfenced in several places, with here and there a broad, yawning chasm in the direct path, where some huge bulk of the soft earthy cliff, undermined by fierce winter tides, had broken bodily away and had gone to feed the ever-hungry waves. But to Lionel every dangerous point was familiar, and he followed the little circuitous bends in the path, necessitated by the breaks in the frontage of the cliff, instinctively and without thought.

He had been thinking of Edith West—his ladye-love, whom he might not hope ever to see again. In his long solitary walks both by day and night she was almost always in his thoughts. Not but what Lionel, this evening, had an eye for the lightning, so beautifully terrible in its apparently purposeless vagaries. Fast following one another, came the blue, quivering flashes, lighting up, for one brief moment at a time, the barren

skyward-climbing cliff, and the still more barren waste of sea.

“Like my life—like my life,” murmured Lionel to himself, his eyes still bent on the wide tract of moorland, which had just been lighted up by a more vivid flash than common. “Barren and unprofitable. Without byre or homestead. Left unploughed, unfenced, uncared for. Of no apparent use, were it not that a few wild-flowers choose to grow there, and a few birds, equally wild, to build their nests there. But over it, as over more favoured spots, the free breeze of heaven blows day and night, and keeps it sweet; and the sea makes everlasting music at its feet.”

These thoughts were still in Mr. Dering’s mind when a sudden turn in the pathway brought him in view of the lighthouse, whose gleaming lantern, although full half a mile away, shone out through the coming storm like the cheery welcome of a friend.

The thunder was coming nearer, bringing the rain with it. The flashes were becoming more vividly painful. The sea’s hoarse chorus

was growing more loud and triumphant. Lionel had paused for a moment to gather breath. A flash—and there, not fifty yards away, and coming towards him, was a man—a stranger ! It was the work of an instant for the lightning to photograph the picture on his brain, but that one instant was enough for him to see and recognize the deadly peril in which the man was placed. He was marching unknowingly to his death. Not six yards in front of him yawned the most dangerous chasm in the whole face of the cliff.

In another moment Lionel had recovered his presence of mind. “Stop ! stop for your life !” he shouted at the top of his voice. “Don’t stir another step.” It was too dark for him to see whether the man had heard and understood his warning cry. He must wait for the next flash to tell him that. The words had hardly left his lips when the thunder burst almost immediately overhead, as it seemed, and the first heavy drops of rain began to fall. Lionel, meantime, was making

his way as quickly as he could round the back of the chasm. Two minutes more would bring him to the very spot where he had seen the stranger. But while he had still some dozen yards or more of the dangerous path to traverse, there came another blinding flash. It had come and gone in the twinkling of an eye, but that brief second of time was sufficient to show Lionel that the man was no longer there. An inarticulate cry of horror burst from his lips. With beating heart and straining nerves, he pressed forward till he stood on the very spot where he had seen the man ; but he was standing there alone.

The storm was at its height. The forked flashes came thick and fast. One crack of thunder was followed by another, before the echoed mutterings of the last had time to die away. A wild hurricane of wind and rain was beating furiously over land and sea. Utterly regardless of the storm, Lionel lay down at full length on the short, wet turf, and shading his eyes with his hands, peered down into the black gulf below. It was a

dangerous thing to do, but in the excitement of the moment all sense of personal fear was forgotten. He waited for the flashes ; but when they came they showed him nothing save the wild turmoil of the rising tide as it dashed itself in fury against the huge boulders with which the beach was thickly strewn. It would be high water in half-an-hour. Already the base of the cliff was washed by the inrushing waves. Lionel shouted with all his might, but the wind blew the sound back again, and the thunder drowned it. He stood up despairingly. What should he do to succour the poor wretch who lay there, dying or, perhaps, already dead, at the foot of the cliff? What *could* he do? Alone and unaided he could do nothing. He must seek the help of others. But where? The nearest point where he could hope to get assistance was the lighthouse, and that was nearly half-a-mile away. But long before the lighthouse could have been reached, and help brought back, the rising tide would have completely barred the passage along the foot of

the cliffs, and would, in all probability, have washed the body out to sea. At the point where he was standing, the cliff had a sheer descent of a hundred feet to the beach. But suddenly Mr. Dering remembered, and it seemed to him like a flash of inspiration, that no great distance away there was a slight natural break in the cliff, known as "The Smugglers' Staircase." It was merely a narrow gully or seam in the face of the rock, not much wider than an ordinary chimney. If it had ever really been used by smugglers in years gone by as a natural staircase, by means of which access could be had to the beach, they must have been very active and reckless fellows indeed. But what had been made use of by one man might be made use of by another, Lionel thought, and, with some faint renewal of hope in his breast, he made his way along the cliff in the direction of the staircase. If he could only get down to the beach before the tide had risen much higher, and could succeed in finding the body, he might, perhaps, be able to obtain some foothold among

the crannies of the cliff, where he would be beyond reach of the waves, and where he might wait till daybreak, and the ebbing of the tide, should give him a chance of seeking help elsewhere.

But here he was at the staircase—a place, of a truth, to try a man's nerve, even by broad daylight. Although Lionel had never ventured either up or down it, he was no stranger to its peculiar features. More than once, in his rambles along the cliffs, he had paused to examine it, and to wonder whether the jagged, misshapen ledges of protruding rock from which it was supposed to derive its likeness to a gigantic staircase, were the result of nature's handiwork or that of man.

Lionel had lost no time. From his first sight of the stranger till now was not more than five or six minutes. Pausing for a moment on the edge of the staircase, he flung his hat aside, buttoned his coat, and then, instinctively, turned up his cuffs. Then he went down on his hands and knees, and was just lowering one leg over the edge of

the cliff, when his collar was roughly seized, and a hoarse voice growled in his ear: "In heaven's name, Mr. Dering, what are you about?"

For the moment, Lionel was startled. Next instant he recognized Bunce, the coastguardsmen—a very worthy fellow, to whom he was well known. A few rapid words from Lionel explained everything. "All the same, Mr. Dering, you can't bring the dead back to life, do how you will," said Bunce, "and that man's as dead as last year's mackerel, you may depend on't. Let alone which, the tide's right up to the bottom of the cliff. No, no, Mr. Dering—axing your pardon—but one live man is worth twenty dead uns."

"Bunce, you are a fool!" said Lionel, wrathfully. "If I were not in a hurry, I would prove it to you. Take your hand off my collar, sir. I tell you I am going down here. If you choose to help me, go to the lighthouse and get Jasper to come back with you, and bring some ropes and a lantern or two, and whatever else you think might be

useful. If you don't choose to help me, go about your business, and leave me to do mine."

"But you are going to certain death; you are indeed, Mr. Dering," pleaded the coast-guard'sman.

"Bunce," said Lionel, "you are an old woman. Good-bye." There was a flash, and Bunce caught a momentary glimpse of a stern white face, and two resolute eyes. When the next flash came, Lionel was not to be seen. He was on his perilous journey down the Smugglers' Staircase.

"A madman—a crazy madman," muttered Bunce. "If he gets safe to the bottom of the staircase, he'll go no farther. Not as I'm going to desert him. Not likely. Though he did call me a old woman."

Going down on one knee on the wet grass, he put both his hands to his mouth, and shouted with all his might: "I'm going to the lighthouse for help, Mr. Dering." He listened, but there came no answer. Presently, with a little quaking of the heart, he

rose to his feet. "He needn't have called me a old woman," he muttered. With that he pulled his hat fiercely over his brow, and set off for the lighthouse at a rapid walk, which soon quickened into a run.

How Lionel got down to the bottom of the staircase he could never afterwards have told. He only knew that when about half way down his foot slipped. The next thing he remembered was finding himself among the rocks at the bottom, bruised, bleeding, and partially stunned. A larger wave than usual, which dashed completely over him, gave him a shock which helped to revive him. Not the least perilous part of his enterprise was still before him. Already the tide was two feet deep at the foot of the cliff. Fortunately, the wind had gone down, and the rain had in some measure abated; but had it not been for the lightning's friendly flashes, Lionel's task would have been a hopeless one. The road he had to take was thickly strewn with huge boulders, and gigantic masses of rock which had fallen—some of them centuries ago.

—from the cliffs overhead. Between and over these Lionel had to make his way to the point where the stranger had fallen. It was a work of time and peril, more especially now that the tide was coming in so dangerously fast, beating and eddying round the rocks and dashing over them in showers of stinging spray. Lionel saw clearly that, in any case, it would be quite impossible for him to return by the way he was going till ebb of tide. He must find some “coign of vantage” among the fallen rocks, or high up in the face of the cliff, beyond reach of the waves, and there wait patiently for further help. But first to find the stranger.

Manfully, gallantly, Lionel Dering set himself to the task before him. Foot by foot, yard by yard, he fought his way forward. The lightning showed him at once the dangers he had to contend against, and how best to avoid them. Over some of the rocks he had to clamber on all fours; round others he had to pick his way, waist-deep in water. Now and then, a larger wave than common

would seize him, dash him like a log against the rocks, and then leave him, bruised and breathless, to gather up its forces for another attack. But Lionel never faltered or looked back. Onward he went, slowly but surely nearing the object of which he was in search. Nearly exhausted, all but worn out, at length he reached the heap of *débris* formed by the falling of the cliff—or rather that portion of it which the sea had spared. He was terribly anxious by this time. If the body of the stranger when it fell had been caught by any of the ledges or rough projecting angles of the *débris*, and had lodged there, there was just a faint possibility that the man might be still alive. But if, on the contrary, it had rolled down to the foot of the cliff, the waves would long ago have claimed it as their own.

The storm was passing away inland. The lightning was no longer either so frequent or so vivid. Lionel's difficulty was to find the exact point of the cliff from which the stranger had fallen. At the most he could only guess

at it. Still, here was the mass of fallen cliff, and the body, unless washed away by the tide, could not be far off.

Having accomplished so much, he had neither long nor far to search. Putting out his hand in the dark to grasp a projecting ledge of rock, which the last flash of lightning had shown to him, his fingers touched a clammy ice-cold face. He drew back his arm with an involuntary shudder. Next moment his heart gave a great throb of relief, and he felt that, whether the man were alive or dead, his labour had not been entirely in vain.

The body was lying among a heap of jagged rocks, half in and half out of the water. Lionel's first idea was that the man was stone dead. But a more careful examination, which he made as soon as he had dragged the body beyond reach of the still-rising tide, convinced him that there were still some flickering signs of life—just the faintest possible pulsation of the heart. The forehead was marked by a thin streak of blood, which Lionel tried to

stanch with his handkerchief. For the rest, he made out, by the momentary glimpses which the lightning afforded him, that the man was young, fair, slightly built, and, to all appearance, a gentleman. Feeling some hard substance, Lionel put his hand into the stranger's pocket, and drew from it a small travelling flask. It contained a little brandy, with which Lionel moistened the unconscious lips, but the stranger's teeth were so firmly set that he found it impossible to open them. What more could he do? he asked himself, and he was obliged to answer, Nothing. If Bunce had not deserted him, help would be forthcoming before long. Otherwise, he must wait there for daybreak and the ebbing of the tide.

But faithful, good-hearted Bunce had not deserted him. He had roused up Jasper, the lighthouse-keeper, out of his first snooze—Jasper's two mates being on duty—and had brought that individual, still half dazed, but responding manfully to the call, together with a quantity of stout rope, and a couple of ship's

lanterns, not forgetting a blanket and a nip of cognac, and was back again on the cliffs only a few minutes after Lionel's search was at an end.

Never had human voice sounded so welcome to Lionel as did the coastguardsman's hoarse shouts that August night. They soon made each other out, and then the rest was comparatively easy. A rope was slung round the body of the still unconscious stranger, which was then hauled up by the two men with all possible care to the top of the cliff, a process which was repeated in the case of Lionel.

"I never thought to see you alive again, Mr. Dering," said Bunce, with tears in his eyes, as Lionel grasped him warmly by the hand. "Where do you wish to have the gentleman taken to?"

"To Gatehouse Farm, of course," said Lionel. "Jasper, you run into the village, and borrow a horse and cart, and some straw, and another blanket or two, and get back again as if your life depended on it."

And so about midnight the stranger, who

had never recovered consciousness, was laid in Mr. Dering's own bed at Gatehouse Farm. They had found a card-case in his pocket, the cards in which were inscribed with the name of "Mr. Tom Bristow," but that was the only clue to his identity. Dr. Bell, the local practitioner, was quickly on the spot.

"A serious case, Mr. Dering—a very serious case," said the little man, two hours later, while pulling on his gloves and waiting for his cob to be brought round. "But we have an excellent constitution to fall back upon, and, with great care, we shall pull through. We have dislocated our left shoulder; we have broken three of our ribs; and we have got one of the ugliest cuts on the back of our head that it was ever our good fortune to have to deal with. But with care, sir, we shall pull through."


Somewhat comforted in mind by the doctor's assurance, Lionel went back upstairs, and having taken a parting glance at his guest, and satisfied himself that nothing more could be done for the present, he lay.

down on the sofa in the next room to catch an hour's hurried sleep.

He had no prevision of the future, that August morning: there was no voice to whisper in his ear that the man whose life he had just saved at the risk of his own would, before many months were over, repay the obligation by rescuing him, Lionel Dering, from a still more bitter strait, and be the means of restoring him both to liberty and life.

CHAPTER II.

THE HERMIT OF GATEHOUSE FARM.

IONEL DERING at this time was twenty-eight years old. A tall, well-built, fair-complexioned man, but bronzed by much exposure to the sun and wind. His eyes were dark gray, very steady and penetrating. He had a habit of looking full into the faces of those with whom he talked, as though he were trying to penetrate the mask before him. It was a habit which some people did not like. He had never shaved in his life, and the strong, firm lines of his mouth, betokening immense power of will, and great tenacity of purpose, were all but hidden by the soft, flowing outlines of a thick beard and moustache, pale

golden as to colour. His free, out-door life, and the hard work to which he had accustomed himself of late years, had widened his chest and hardened his muscles, and had ripened him into a very tolerable specimen of those stalwart, fair-bearded islanders whose forms and figures are familiar wherever the English language is spoken. For three years past he had been living the life of a modern hermit at Gatehouse Farm. His reasons for choosing thus to isolate himself entirely from the world of his old friends and associations, to bury himself alive, as it were, while all the pleasures of life were still sweet to his lips, will not take long to explain.

Lionel Dering came of a good family on both his father's side and his mother's. Unfortunately, on his father's side there was little or no money, and his mother's side never forgave the marriage, which was one of those romantic run-away affairs of which people used to hear every week at a time when the blacksmith of Gretna Green was a legal forger of matrimonial fetters.

After nine years of married happiness, Godfrey Dering died, leaving his widow with two children, Lionel, aged eight, and Richard, aged six. Mrs. Dering found herself with an annuity of six hundred pounds a year, which her husband's care and prevision had secured to her. For the future, this would be the sole means of subsistence of herself and children. Her own family had repudiated her from the day of her marriage, and she was too proud to court them now. She sent her two boys away to a good school, and while still undecided where she would permanently fix her home, she went to live for a while with some of her husband's friends at Cheltenham—and at Cheltenham she stayed till the day of her death. The Langshaws, under whose roof she found a home during the first year of her bereavement, were worthy well-to-do farmers, distant relations of Godfrey, who seemed as if they could never do enough for pretty Mrs. Dering and her two fatherless boys. After a time she took lodgings in the town itself, where her money and her good looks, com-

bined with her amiability and easy, cheerful disposition, soon attracted around her a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. She had several offers of marriage during the ten years of her widowhood, but she remained steadily faithful to the memory of her first love, and when she died her husband's name was the last word on her lips.

His mother died when Lionel Dering was eighteen years old, six months after his younger brother, Richard, had gone to India to carve out for himself that mythical fortune which every youthful enthusiast believes must one day infallibly be his.

Lionel had been brought up to no business or profession. While still a youth at school, a great part of his holidays had been spent at the Langshaw's farm, three miles out of Cheltenham, where he was always a welcome guest. Here he learned to ride, to drive, to shoot, and to take an interest in all those outdoor avocations which mark the due recurrence of the seasons on a large and well-managed farm. But when his school-days

were really at an end, both Lionel and his mother were utterly at a loss to decide in which particular groove the young man's talents—genius Mrs. Dering called it—would be likely to meet with their amplest and most speedy recognition.

Truth to tell, the widowed mother trembled at the idea of parting from her favourite boy, of letting him go out unprotected into the great world, so full of wickedness and temptation, of which she herself knew so little, but about which she had heard such terrible tales. So week passed after week, and month after month, and Lionel Dering still stayed at home with his mother. An inquiry was made here and there, a letter written now and then, but all in a half-hearted sort of way, and Mrs. Dering never heard the postman's knock without trembling lest it should be the herald of a summons which would tear Lionel from her side for ever. When, at last, the dreadful summons did come, in the shape of the offer of an excellent situation in India, Mrs. Dering declared that it would break her heart if

Lionel left her. She was a very delicate little woman, be it borne in mind, and Lionel, who loved her tenderly, fully believed every word she said—believed that her heart would really break if they were separated—as in all probability it would have done. “I won’t leave you, mother—I won’t go away to India,” said Lionel, as he kissed away her tears.

“You might let *me* go, mother, instead of Li,” said Richard, as he too kissed her. “If you love me, mother, let me go.”

So Richard went to India in place of his brother, and Lionel still stayed at home. Six months later, Mrs. Dering, who had been a partial invalid for years, died quite suddenly, and Lionel found himself, after the payment of all expenses, with about fifty pounds in ready money, and no ascertainable means of earning his own living.

In this emergency, a certain Mr. Eitzen-schlager, a German merchant, who had met Mrs. Dering in society some five or six years previously, and had fallen in love with her to no purpose, came to the rescue by offering

Lionel a stool in his counting-house, at Liverpool. But to Lionel, with his outdoor tastes, the thought of any mode of life which involved confinement within doors was utterly distasteful. He preferred taking up his quarters for a time with his old friends the Langshaws, and there waiting till another opening should give him an opportunity of joining his brother in India.

When Dorothy St. George ran away from home to marry Godfrey Dering, she never afterwards saw her father, nor any member of her family, except her youngest brother, Lionel—the brother after whom her eldest boy was named. He was a soldier, and shortly after Dorothy's marriage he was ordered abroad, but he wrote occasionally to the sister whom as a boy he had loved so well, therein disobeying his father's express command, that no communication of any kind should henceforth be held with the disgraced daughter of the house. But many years passed before Lionel St. George had an opportunity of seeing his sister—not, in fact,

till some time after their father's death : not till he had won his way up, step by step, to the rank of general, and had come back from India, a grizzled veteran, with a year's leave of absence in which to recruit his health, and pay brief visits to such of his relatives and friends as death had spared. His sister Dorothy was one of the first whom he made a point of seeing. For Lionel he contracted a great liking, chiefly, perhaps, because his nephew was named after him, and because in the tall, bronzed young man he saw, or fancied that he saw, many points of resemblance to what he himself had been in happy days long gone by. It was a pity, the general said to himself, that such a fine young fellow should be kept tied to his mother's apron string. So, after he got back to India, he brought his influence to bear, and an eligible opening for Lionel was quickly found. But, as we have already seen, Lionel did not avail himself of his uncle's offer. Richard went to India in his stead, and Lionel was by his mother's side when she died.

Left thus alone, it seemed to Lionel that he could not do better than join his brother, and he wrote his uncle to that effect.

But before he could possibly get an answer from India, something happened which changed the whole current of his life. Mr. Eitzenschlager, the German merchant, died, and left Lionel a legacy of twenty thousand pounds.

What a fund of quiet, unsuspected romance there must have been in the heart of the old Teuton! At fifty years of age he had fallen in love with pretty Mrs. Dering; but Mrs. Dering had nothing but esteem to give him in return. Once rejected, he never spoke of his feelings again, but went on loving in secret and in silence. Had Mrs. Dering outlived him, the twenty thousand pounds would have been left to her. As it was, the money was left to the son whom she had loved so well.

An unexpected legacy of twenty thousand pounds is enough to upset the calculations of most men. It upset Lionel's. The idea of going out to India was abandoned indefinitely.

Now had come the time when he could carry out the cherished wish of his life. Time and money were both at his command, and he would travel—travel far and wide, studying “men and manners, climates, councils, governments.” When he was tired of travel, he would buy a little estate somewhere, and settle down quietly for the remainder of his days as a gentleman farmer. Such were some of the day-dreams of simple-minded Lionel—day-dreams which the future would laugh to scorn.

Hitherto Lionel had escaped scathless and heart-whole from all the soft seductive wiles prepared by Love to ensnare the unwary. But his time had come at last, as it comes to all of us. He saw Edith West, and acknowledged himself a lost man. Nor could any one who knew Edith wonder at his infatuation. She was an orphan and an heiress. She lived with her uncle, Mr. Garside, who was also her guardian. Lionel saw her for the first time in a railway carriage, when she and Mrs. Garside were travelling from London to Cheltenham. There was a slight accident

to the train, and Lionel was enabled to show the ladies some little attention. Three weeks after that chance meeting, Lionel proposed in form for the hand of Mr. Garside's niece.

Lionel's proposal was very favourably received, for Mr. Garside was prudence itself, and young men worth twenty thousand pounds are not to be met with every day. Very wisely, however, he stipulated that the lovers should wait a year before fastening themselves irrevocably together.

So Lionel, after spending two months in London, where he had an opportunity of seeing Edith every day, set out on his travels. In ten months from the date of his departure he was to come back and claim her for his wife. He left the Continent and the ordinary lines of tourist travel to be done by Edith and himself after marriage, and started direct for America. Cities and city life on the other side of the Atlantic did not detain him long. He panted for the wild, free life and noble sports of the prairies and mountain slopes of the Far West. He spent six happy

months with his rifle and an Indian guide on the extreme borders of civilized life. Then he crossed the Rocky Mountains, and found himself, after a time, at San Francisco. There letters from home awaited. One of the first that he opened told him of the failure of the bank in which the whole of his legacy, except a few hundred pounds, had been deposited. Lionel Dering was a ruined man.

One morning, about three months later, Lionel was ushered into the private office of Mr. Garside, in Old Broad Street, City. The rich merchant shook hands with him, and was polite but freezing. Lionel went at once to the object of his visit. "You have heard of my loss, Mr. Garside?" he said.

"I have, and am very sorry for it," said the merchant.

"I have saved nothing from the wreck but a few hundred pounds. Under these circumstances, I come to you, as Miss West's guardian, to tell you that I give up at once, and unreservedly, all pretensions to that lady's hand. I absolve her freely and entirely from

the promise she made me. Miss West is an heiress : I am a poor man : we have no longer anything in common."

"Very gentlemanly, Mr. Dering—very gentlemanly, indeed. But only what I should have expected from *you*."

Lionel cut him short somewhat impatiently. "You will greatly oblige me—for the last time—by giving this note to Miss West. I wish her to understand, direct from myself, the motives by which I have been actuated. This is hardly a place," looking round the office, "in which to talk of love, or even of affection ; but, in simple justice to myself, I may say—and I think you will believe me—that the feelings with which I regarded Miss West when I first spoke to you twelve months ago, are utterly unchanged, and, so far as a fallible human being may speak with certainty, they will remain unchanged. I think I have nothing more to say."

But Lionel's note never reached Edith West. When Mr. Garside had finished recounting to his wife the details of his inter-

view with "that strange young man," he gave her the note to give to Edith; but the giving of it was accompanied by a look which his wife was not slow to comprehend. The note was never alluded to again between husband and wife, but somehow it failed to reach the hands for which it was intended. Edith was simply told by her guardian that Mr. Dering, with a high-minded feeling which did him great credit, had broken off the engagement. "He is a poor man—a very poor man, my dear," said Mr. Garside, "and he has the good sense to know that you are not calculated for a poor man's wife."

"How does he know that—or you—or anybody?" flashed out Edith. "But Lionel Dering never made use of those words, uncle. They are an addition of your own."

Nevertheless, the one great bitter fact still remained, that her lover had given her up. "If he had only called to see me—or even written!" she said to herself. But days, weeks, months, passed away, and there came no further sign from Lionel. So Edith locked

up her love, as some sacred thing, in the innermost casket of her heart, and the name that was sweeter to her than all other earthly names, never passed her lips after that day except in her prayers.

Lionel was not long in making up his mind as to his future course. He had still two or three hundred pounds in ready money, and one small plot of ground that he could truly call his own. The tiny estate in question was known as Gatehouse Farm, and consisted of nothing more than an old-fashioned, tumble-down house, terribly out of repair ; an orchard of tolerable dimensions, and about twenty acres of poorish grass-land ; the whole being situated in a remote corner of the north-east coast of England. This modest estate had been his father's sole patrimony, and for that father's sake Lionel had long ago resolved never to part from it. He had visited it once or twice when quite a boy, and from that time it had lived in his memory as a pleasant recollection. To this spot he made up his mind that he would retire for awhile. Here

he would shut himself up from the world, and, like King Arthur, "heal him of his wounds." He confessed to himself that he was slightly hipped; a little at odds with Fortune. The ordinary objects and ambitions of his age, which, under other circumstances would probably have found him an eager partizan, had, for the present at least, lost their savour. He was not without friends—good friends, who would have been willing and able to help him on in any career he might have chosen to adopt, but just at that time all their propositions seemed equally distasteful to him. Ambition for the moment was dead within him. All he asked was to be allowed to drop quietly out of the circle of those who knew him, and cherish, or cure, in a solitude of his own seeking, those inward hurts for which Time is the sole physician.

As it happened, the tenant of Gatehouse Farm was lately dead; there was, consequently, nothing to stand in the way of its immediate occupation by Lionel. It was neither a very picturesque nor a very com-

portable residence, but sufficiently the latter to satisfy its owner's simple wants. Its upper story consisted of four or five bedrooms. Downstairs was a large and commodious kitchen, together with a house-room, or, as we should call it, a parlour. This latter room was chosen by Lionel for his own particular den. It had white-washed walls, and two diamond-paned windows of dull thick glass, but the floor was made of splendid oaken planks. The walls Lionel left as he found them, except that over the fireplace he hung a portrait of Edith, and his two favourite rifles; but on the floor he spread two or three skins of wild animals, trophies of his prowess in the chase. In a corner near the fireplace, handy to reach, were the twenty or thirty authors whom he had brought with him to be the companions of his solitude. In the opposite corner was the only article de luxe to be found in the house: a splendid cottage piano, of Erard's build.

The dead and gone builder of the house, whose initials, with the date 1685, were still

conspicuous on a tablet over the front door, had never been troubled with that mania for the picturesque in nature and art about which we moderns are perpetually prating. In its own little way his house was intensely ugly, and he had persistently built it with its back to the only fine view that could be seen from its windows in any direction. Even after all these years, there was not another house within a mile of it. The only point of habitable life visible from it was the lighthouse. But it was this solitariness, this isolation from the world, which formed its great feature of attraction in the eyes of Lionel. One other attraction it had for him. You had only to cross a couple of small fields, and follow, for a hundred yards or more, a climbing footway that led across a patch of sandy common, and then, all at once, you saw spread out, far and wide before you, the ever-glorious sea.

To this place came Lionel Dering in less than a month after writing his last letter to Edith West, and here he had since stayed. Two farm labourers and one middle-aged

woman constituted the whole of his household. What further labour he might require in his farming operations, he hired. He rose at five o'clock in summer and at six in winter. From the time he got up till two o'clock he worked as hard as any of his own men. The remainder of the day he claimed for his own private uses. He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped. At one time he planted potatoes, at another he dug them up; and nowhere within a score of miles were such fine standard-roses to be seen as at Gatehouse Farm. He found some land to let conveniently near his own small patch, and he hired it. At the end of his second year at the farm he calculated his profits at one hundred and eighty pounds, and was perfectly satisfied.

Lionel saw no company, and never went into society. He was well known to the lighthouse keepers and to most of the boatmen. With them he would talk freely enough. Their racy sayings, their homely, vigorous diction, their simple mode of life, pleased him. When talking with them he forgot, for a time,

himself and his own thoughts, and the change did him good. Not that there was anything of the melancholy, love-sick swain about Lionel—any morbid brooding over his own disappointment, and troubles. No one ever saw him otherwise than cheerful. He was perfectly healthy both in mind and body. Nevertheless, his solitary mode of life, and his persistent isolation of himself from his friends and equals, all tended to throw him back upon his own thoughts, and to make him habitually self-introspective, to confirm him in a growing habit of mental analysis.

Whatever the state of the weather, Lionel hardly ever let a day pass without taking a long, solitary ramble into the country for eight or ten miles. Then he had his books, and his piano—which latter was, perhaps, the greatest consolation of his solitude—and the luxury of his own lonely musings as he sat and smoked, hour after hour, with unlighted lamp, and marked how the glowing cinders shaped themselves silently to the fashion of his thoughts.

Two years had by no means sufficed to tire Lionel Dering of his solitary life. In fact, he grew to like it better, to cling to it more emphatically, every day. It satisfied his present needs and ambitions, and that was all he asked. Calmly indifferent, he allowed himself to drift slowly onward towards a future in whose skies there seemed for him no bright bow of promise—nothing but the unbroken grayness of an autumn day that has neither wind, nor sunshine, nor any change.

CHAPTER III.

THE FOUNDATION OF A FRIENDSHIP.



NOTWITHSTANDING Dr. Bell's hopeful prognostications, it seemed very doubtful whether Mr. Tom Bristow would ever leave Gatehouse Farm alive. "I did not think his hull was quite so badly damaged as it is," said the worthy doctor, who had formerly been in the navy, to Lionel. "And his figure-head has certainly been terribly knocked about, but he's an A 1 craft, and I can't help thinking that he'll weather the storm."

And weather the storm he did—thanks to good nursing and a good constitution. When he once took a turn for the better, his progress towards recovery was rapid. But Sep-

tember had come and gone, and the frosts of early winter lay white on meadow and fold, before the doctor's gray pony ceased calling at Gatehouse Farm on its daily rounds. Long before this time, however, a feeling of more than ordinary friendship had grown up between Lionel Dering and Tom Bristow. The points of dissimilarity in the characters of the two men were very marked, but it may be that they liked each other none the less on that account. In any case, this dissimilarity of disposition lent a piquancy to their friendship which it would not otherwise have possessed.

But who and what was this Mr. Tom Bristow?

The account which he gave of himself to Lionel, one afternoon, when far advanced towards recovery, was somewhat vague and meagre; but it more than satisfied the master of Gatehouse Farm, who was one of the least inquisitive of mortals; and, for the present, it will have to satisfy the reader also.

They were sitting on a rustic bench just outside the farm porch, basking in the genial

September sunshine. Lionel had his meerschaum between his lips, and was fondling the head of his favourite dog, Osric. Tom Bristow, who never smoked, was busy with a piece of boxwood and a pocket-knife. Little by little he was fashioning the wood into a capital but slightly caricatured likeness of worthy doctor Bell—a likeness which the jovial medico would be the first to recognize and laugh at when finished. Tom was a slim-built, aquiline-nosed, fair-complexioned, young fellow; rather under than over the ordinary height; and looking younger than he really was—he was six-and-twenty years old—by reason of his perfectly smooth and close-shaven face, which cherished not the slightest growth of whiskers, beard, or moustache. Tom's first action on coming to his senses after his accident was to put his hand to his chin, just then bristling with a stubble of several days' growth; and his first words to the startled nurse were, "My dear madam, I shall feel greatly obliged by your sending for a barber." His eyes were blue, full of

vivacity, and keenly observant of all that went on around him. He had a very good-natured smile, which showed off to advantage a very white and even set of teeth. His hands and feet were small, and he was rather inclined to be proud of them. His dress, while studiously plain in appearance, was made of the best materials, and owed its origin to one of the most famous of London tailors.

“Dering,” said Tom suddenly—they had been sitting for full five minutes without a word—“it is five weeks to-day since you saved my life.”

“What a memory you have!”

“Seeing that one’s life is not saved every day, I may be excused for remembering the fact, unimportant though it may seem to others. It is five weeks to-day since I was brought to Gatehouse Farm, and during all that time you have never asked me a question about myself or my antecedents. You don’t even know whether you have been en-

tertaining a soldier, a sailor, a tinker, a tailor, a what's-his-name, or a thief."

"I didn't wait to ask myself any question of that kind when I went down the cliff in search of you, and I don't see why I need trouble myself now."

"As a matter of simple justice both to you and himself, the mysterious stranger will now throw off his mystery, and appear in the common-place garb of real life."

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," said Lionel. "Your object just now is to get thoroughly well. Never mind anything else."

"There's no time like the time present. I'm ashamed of myself for not having spoken to you before."

"If that's the matter with you, I know you must have your say. Proceed, worthy young man, with your narrative, and get it over as quickly as possible."

"I was born at a little town in the mid-land counties," began Tom. "My father was chief medical practitioner in the place, and

attended all the swells of the neighbourhood. His intention from the first was to bring me up to the law ; so, as soon as I was old enough, he had me articed to old Hoskyns, his bosom friend, and the chief solicitor in the little town. I didn't like the law—in fact, I hated it ; but there seemed no better prospect for me at that time, so I submitted to my fate without a murmur. My father died when I was seventeen, leaving me a fortune of six thousand pounds. I stayed quietly on with Hoskyns till I was twenty-one. The day I was of age, the old gentleman called me into his private room, congratulated me on having attained my majority, and asked me in what way I intended to invest my six thousand pounds. 'I am not going to invest it : I am going to speculate with it,' was my answer. The old lawyer looked at me as if I were a madman. 'Going to speculate in what?' he asked faintly. 'Going to speculate on the Stock Exchange,' was my reply. Well, the old gentleman raved and stormed, and talked to me as though I were a son of his own,

even hinting at a possible partnership in time to come. But my mind had long been made up, and nothing he had to say could move me. It seemed to me that in my six thousand pounds I had the foundation of a fortune which might in time grow into something colossal. It is true that the course I had laid down for myself was not without its risks. It was quite possible that instead of building up a large fortune, I should lose the little one I had already. Well, should that black day ever come, it would be time enough then to think of going back to Hoskyns, and of settling down for life as the clerk of a provincial lawyer.

“My father’s death left me without any relations, except some far-away cousins whom I had never seen. There was nothing to keep me in my native town, so I set out for London, with many prophecies of coming ruin ringing in my ears. I hired a couple of cheap rooms in a quiet city court, and set up in business as a speculator, and to that business I have stuck ever since.”

“Which is as much as to say that you have been successful in it,” said Lionel.

“I *have* been successful in it. Not perhaps quite so successful as my sanguine youthful hopes led me to believe I should be ; but still sufficiently so to satisfy myself that in choosing such a career I did not choose altogether unwisely.”

“But how is it possible,” said Lionel, “that you, a raw country lad of one and twenty, could go and settle down in the great world of London ; and, without experience of your own, or any friendly hand to guide you, could venture to play at a game which exercises some of the keenest intellects of the age—and not only venture to play at it, but rise from it a winner ?”

“The simplest answer to that question would be, that I did do it. But really, after all, the matter is not a very difficult one. I have always been guided by three or four very simple rules, and so long as I stick to them, I don’t think I can go very far amiss. I never invest all my money in one or even two

speculations, however promising they may seem. I never run great risks for the sake of problematical great profits. Let my profits be small but sure, and I am quite content. Lastly, I put my money, as far as possible, into concerns that I can examine personally for myself, even though I should have to make a journey of three hundred miles to do it. See the affair with your own eyes, judge it for yourself, and then leave it for your common sense to decide whether you shall put your money into it or no. In all such professions, natural aptitude—the gift that we possess almost unconsciously to ourselves—is the grand secret of success.”

“Success in your case means that you are on the high road to being a millionaire?”

“Now you are laughing at me.”

“Not at all. I am only judging you by your own standard.”

“And is the standard such a very poor one?”

“Not a poor one at all, as the world goes. I should like very much to be a millionaire.”

“To say that I am not richer to-day than I was the day I was twenty-one would not be true,” said Tom, with a demure smile. “I am years and years, half a lifetime at the very least, from being a millionaire—if, indeed, I ever live to be one. But I no longer live in two cheap rooms in the city, and dine at an eating-house for fifteen pence. I have very nice chambers just out of Piccadilly, where you must look me up when you are next in town. I belong to a club where I have an opportunity of meeting good people—by ‘good people’ I mean people who may some day be useful to me in my struggle through life. Finally, I ride my hack in the Park two or three afternoons a week during the season, and am on bowing terms with a duchess.”

“I can no longer doubt that you are a rising man,” said Lionel, with a laugh.

“My head is full of schemes of one kind or another,” said Tom, a little wearily. “Or rather it was full of them before I met with that confounded accident. In one or the other of those schemes the duchess will play

her part like any other pawn that may be on my chess-board at the time. There is no keener speculator in the whole City of London than her Grace of Leamington."

"What a martyrdom it must seem to you to be shut up here, in this dull old house, so far away from the exciting life you have learned to love so well!"

"A martyrdom, Dering? It is anything but that. Had I been well in health, I can't tell what my feelings might have been. I should probably have considered it a waste of time to have spent a month, either here or anywhere else, in absolute idleness. But being ill, and having just been dragged back, by main force as it were, from Death's very door, I cannot tell you how grateful, how soothing to me is the quietude of this old spot. If, now and then, when I feel better and stronger, there come moments when I long to glance over the money article of 'The Times,' or to write a long, impatient letter to my broker in London, there are days and nights when such things have no longer the

faintest interest for me—times when bare life itself seems a burden almost too heavy for endurance, and all my ambitious schemes and speculations nothing more than a tissue of huge mistakes.”

“Your old interest in everyday matters will gradually come back to you as you grow better,” said Lionel, “and with it will come the desire to be up and doing.”

“I suppose you are right,” said Tom. “It would never do for a little illness to change the plans and settled aims of a lifetime.”

“No chance of your settling down here at Gatehouse Farm as Hermit Number Two?”

Tom shook his head and laughed. “Do you know, Dering,” he said, “that you are one of the greatest riddles, one of the most incomprehensible fellows, it was ever my fortune to meet with! But, pardon me,” he added hastily. “Of all men in the world, you are the one to whom I ought least to say such words.”

“Nothing of the kind,” said Lionel, with a smile. “I like your frankness. I am aware

that many people look upon me as a sort of harmless lunatic, though what there is so incomprehensible about me I am at a loss to imagine."

"You will forgive me for saying so," said Tom, "but to me it seems such an utter pity to see a man of your education and abilities wasting the best years of his life in a place like this, with no society but that of fishermen and boors: to see a man, young and strong in health, so utterly indifferent to all the ordinary claims of civilized life—to all the aims and ambitions by which the generality of his fellow men are actuated, to the bright career which he might carve out for himself, if he would but take the trouble to do so."

"Ah, that is just it, mon ami: if I would but take the trouble to do so! But is the game really worth the candle? To me, I confess that it is not."

Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"I know that you can afford to pity me—that you look upon me as a sort of good-natured imbecile."

“No—no!” in energetic protest from Tom.

“But what have you to pity me for?” asked Lionel, without heeding the interruption. “I have enough to eat and drink, I have a roof to cover me, and a bed to sleep on. In these important matters I should be no better off if I had ten thousand a-year. As for the society of boors and fishermen, believe me, there is more strength of character, more humour, more pathos, more patient endurance of the ills of this life, and a firmer trust in Providence, among these simple folk than I ever found among those whom you would term my equals in the social scale. Then your ambitions and aims, dignify them with what fine names you will, what are they, nine times out of ten, but the mere vulgar desire to grow rich as quickly as possible! So long as I can earn my bread by the sweat of my brow, and owe no man a penny, I am perfectly satisfied.”

“Argue as you will, Dering, this is neither the place nor the position for a man like you.”

“So long as the place and position suit me, and I them, we shall remain in perfect accord, and no longer,” said Lionel. “I never said that it was my intention to live a hermit all my life ; but at present I am perfectly satisfied.”

Again and again, before Tom Bristow's enforced stay at Gatehouse Farm came to an end, was the same subject broached between him and Lionel, but always with the same result. As Lionel often said to himself, he was utterly without ambition. He was like a man whose active career in the world was at an end ; who knowing that life could have no more prizes in store for him, had settled down quietly in his old age, content to let the race go by, and wait uncomplainingly for the end. It is probable, nay, almost certain, that had his uneventful life at Gatehouse Farm been destined to last much longer, old desires and feelings would gradually have awakened within him ; that in time he would have found his way again into that busy world on which he had turned his back in a tran-

sient fit of disgust, and there have fought the fight before him like the good and true man he really was at heart.

As days went on, Tom Bristow's strength gradually came back to him, and with it came a restlessness, and a desire to be up and doing that was inherent in his disposition. Long before he was allowed down stairs, he had discovered that the old case clock in the kitchen had a trick of indicating the hours peculiar to itself, sometimes omitting to strike them at all, and sometimes going as high as a hundred and fifty ; besides which, its qualities as a timekeeper were not to be depended on. To Tom's orderly and accurate mind the old clock was a great annoyance, so the very first day he came down stairs he took the works entirely to pieces. Then, little by little, as his strength would allow him, he cleaned them, put them together again, regulated them, and finally turned the old clock into so accurate a timekeeper that Mrs. Bevis, Lionel's housekeeper, was quite disturbed in her mind for several days, because

she had no longer any mental calculations to go through before she could be really sure as to the hour. Then, after he had got still stronger, Tom went systematically through all the locks in the house, repairing and putting into thorough working order all that required it. Then he mended the kitchen window, and put up a couple of shelves for Mrs. Bevis in the dairy—all done as neatly as any workman could have done them. In little jobs of this sort Tom took great delight now that he had so many leisure hours on his hands.

But presently there began to arrive at Gatehouse Farm an intermittent stream of letters, newspapers, pamphlets, and blue books, the like of which had never been known within the memory of the oldest man in the village. Lionel himself stared sometimes when he saw them, but they all had a business interest for Tom, who now began to spend a great portion of his time in receiving and answering letters. Such books as there happened to be in Lionel's small

library that had any interest for him—and they were very few indeed—he exhausted during the early days of his illness. How a sensible man could possibly prefer Browning to the money article of “*The Times*,” or an essay by Elia to the account of a great railway meeting, was matter of intense wonderment to Tom. Poets, novelists, essayists, should be left to women, and to men whose fortunes were already made : but for men with a career still before them ; for pushing, striving men of the world, such reading was a sheer waste of valuable time.

But let Tom Bristow be as worldly-minded as he might be, Lionel Dering could not help liking him, and it was with sincere regret he saw the day drawing near when he and his new-found friend must part. With all Tom’s shrewdness and keen love of money-getting, there was a rare unselfishness about him ; and it was probably this fine trait of character, so seldom found in a man of his calibre, that drew Lionel so closely to him. As for Tom, he had never met with anyone before whose

character interested him so profoundly as did that of Dering. Out of that interest grew a liking almost brotherly in its warmth for the strange young hermit of Gatehouse Farm. When the day came for these two men to part, they felt as if they had known each other for years. At the last moment they shook hands without a word. Tears stood in Tom's eyes. Lionel would not trust himself to speak for fear of breaking down. One long last grip, then the horses sprang forward, and Tom was gone. Lionel turned slowly indoors, feeling more lonely and sad at heart than he had done since the day his darling Edith was lost to him for ever.

CHAPTER IV.

GOLDEN TIDINGS.



DAYS and weeks passed over before the feeling of loneliness caused by Tom's departure from Gatehouse Farm quite wore itself away—before Lionel got thoroughly back into his old contented frame of mind, and felt again in the daily routine of his quiet homely life that simple satisfaction which had been his before the night of the storm. But as the lengthening days of autumn deepened slowly onward towards Christmas, the restlessness and gloom that had shrouded his life of late began to vanish little by little, so that, by-and-by, as Mrs. Bevis joyfully told her husband, “Master

was beginning to get quite like his old self again."

The farm preparations for winter were all made. Lionel, looking forward to a long period of leisure, had decided to begin the study of Italian. He had been into Melcham to buy the necessary books, and got back home just as candles were being lighted. On the table he found two letters which had arrived by the afternoon post. One of the two was deeply bordered with black; the other he recognized at once as being from Tom Bristow. He opened Tom's letter first.

In a few hurried lines Tom told Lionel how he had been laid up again from a severe cold which had settled on his chest, and how the doctors had ordered that he should start at once for Algeria with a view of wintering there. He wrote rather dolefully, as one whose business concerns would be altogether disarranged by this imperious mandate, which, nevertheless, he dare not disobey. "I hope to come back next spring with the swallows, thoroughly rejuvenated," he wrote; "when I

will not fail to look you up at dear old Gatehouse Farm."

Lionel took up the second letter with some curiosity. But when he saw that it bore the Duxley post-mark, he guessed in a moment the tidings it was about to tell him. Nor was he mistaken. It told him of the death of his uncle, Arthur St. George, of Park Newton, near Duxley, Midlandshire—and contained an invitation to the funeral, and to the subsequent reading of the dead man's last will and testament.

"This letter is written by my uncle's lawyer," said Lionel to himself. "Why couldn't my cousin Kester write to me?"

It was hardly to be expected that Lionel could either feel or express much sorrow for the death of an uncle whom he had never seen; whom he only knew by reputation as a man thoroughly selfish and hard hearted; who had persistently slighted and ignored his, Lionel's, mother, from the day she ran away from home till the day of her death—and who had been heard to declare, again and

again, that neither his sister nor any child of hers should ever touch a penny of his money. Knowing all this, Lionel was surprised to have received even the acknowledgment of an invitation to his uncle's funeral. His cousin Kester was the heir, and would inherit everything. For him, Lionel, to attend as a mourner at the solemn ceremony was to make a hypocrite of himself by assuming a regret which he could not feel.

This Arthur St. George who had just died was Dorothy Dering's eldest brother. He had lived and died a bachelor. The second brother, Geoffry, had died many years before, leaving one son, Kester, who was adopted by Arthur, and always looked upon as his uncle's heir. Of the youngest brother, Lionel, we already know something. He, too, was a bachelor. He it was who, when over from India on leave of absence, had called upon Mrs. Dering, and had subsequently got that appointment for Lionel which his mother was not willing that he should accept.

While in England, General St. George, who

did not believe in family feuds, contrived to bring his two nephews, Lionel and Kester, together. The result was, to a certain extent, a failure. The two young men had never met each other before ; and when, after a week's intercourse, they bade each other good-bye, it is greatly to be doubted whether either of them cared about seeing the other again. Kester, who could make himself very agreeable when he chose to do so, was, as his uncle's heir, inclined to look down upon Lionel, and to treat him with a certain superciliousness which the latter could not readily brook. There was no open rupture between them, but from that time to the present they had never met again.

Before Lionel had quite made up his mind whether he would attend the funeral or not, there came a second note from Mr. Perrins, more imperative than the first one :—" Your cousin, Mr. Kester St. George, is away on the Continent. I am doubtful whether my notification of your uncle's death will reach him in time to allow of his being at the

funeral. You and he are the late Mr. St. George's sole relatives, except General St. George, who is in India. If neither you nor your cousin attend the funeral, your uncle will be followed to the grave by no one of his own blood. But that apart, it is highly desirable that, as a near relative of the deceased gentleman, you should be present at the reading of the will, which is fixed to take place in the blue drawing-room at four o'clock on the afternoon of the day of interment."

After this there was nothing left for Lionel but to go.

It was not without a strange commingling of various feelings that Lionel Dering found himself under the roof of a house which had been the home of his ancestors for two hundred years. A stately and venerable old pile, truly. He had often heard his mother talk about it, but till this day he had never seen it. It was something to feel proud of, that he was the scion of a family which could call a place like Park Newton its home.

He was received by Mr. Perrins with a

cordiality that was at once grave and respectful. Kester St. George had not arrived; neither had there been any message from him. They waited till the last possible moment, but he did not come. Thus it happened that Lionel found himself in the novel position of chief mourner at the funeral of a man whom he had never even seen. He was glad when the ceremony was over.

Then came the reading of the will. "I wish to goodness my cousin would come, even at this the last moment," said Lionel to the lawyer as they walked together towards the blue drawing-room.

"I don't really know that it matters greatly," replied Mr. Perrins with a significant smile. "I dare say we shall get on very well without Mr. Kester St. George."

Ten minutes later Lionel understood the meaning of the lawyer's strange remark. Ten minutes later he found himself the owner of Park Newton, and the possessor of an income of eleven thousand pounds a year.

It was even so. Everything, with the ex-

ception of a few trifling legacies to old servants, that Arthur St. George possessed in the world he had bequeathed without reservation to his nephew, Lionel Dering. The name of Kester St. George was not even mentioned in the will.

“The Park Newton estates have never been entailed,” said Mr. Perrins in parenthesis, as he folded up the will. “It was quite competent to the testator to have left the whole of his property to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, had he chosen to do so.”

For the moment Lionel was overwhelmed. But when Mr. Perrins had congratulated him, and the doctor had congratulated him, and the butler and the housekeeper, old servants of the family, had followed suit, he began to feel as if his good fortune were really a fact.

“Now I can marry Edith,” was his first thought.

“It seems more like a dream than anything else,” said Lionel to Mr. Perrins a little later on, as the latter stood sipping a glass of dry sherry with the air of a connoisseur.

“I should very much like to dream a similar dream,” answered the lawyer.

“But about my cousin Kester St. George,—he was adopted by my uncle after his father’s death, and was brought up at Park Newton, and it was understood by everybody that he was to be my uncle’s heir?”

“It is entirely Mr. Kester St. George’s own fault that he does not stand in your position to-day.”

“I fail to understand you.”

“For years your uncle’s will was made in his favour. Everything was left to him as absolutely as it is now left to you. But about nine months ago your uncle and your cousin had a terrible quarrel. As to how it arose, or what was the cause of it, I know nothing. I can only surmise that your cousin had done something which your uncle felt that he could not forgive. But be that as it may, Mr. Kester St. George was turned out of Park Newton at ten o’clock one night, and forbidden ever to set foot across the threshold again—nor has he ever done so. Next day

your uncle sent for me, and in my presence he tore up the old will which had been in existence for years, and substituted in its place the one which I had the honour of reading this afternoon."

That same night saw Lionel Dering in London. He felt that he could neither go back to Gatehouse Farm, nor make any arrangements respecting his new position, till after he had seen Edith West—till after he had seen her and told her that his love was still unchanged, and that there no longer existed any reason why she should not become his wife.


It was past ten o'clock before he got into London. His mind was too much excited either to allow of his going to bed or of his sitting quietly in the hotel. So he lighted a cigar, and set out for a quiet ramble through the streets. After a time he found himself on Westminster Bridge. He stood awhile watching the river as it flowed along so dark and mysterious—watching it, but with thoughts that were far away. Suddenly he

became conscious of a dull, confused noise, like the far-away murmur of a great crowd. Swiftly the murmur grew, growing and swelling with every moment, till it swelled into a mighty roar from a thousand throats. Then, all at once, there was a flashing of lights, and the trampling of innumerable feet, and three fire-engines went thundering past with yells, and shouts, and hoarse, inarticulate cries from a huge mob that followed hard and fast behind. Lionel stood back to let this crowd of desperadoes pass,—when all at once, among them, but not of them—borne helplessly along by the press from which he was struggling in vain to free himself, he saw his cousin, Kester St. George. There was a lamp close overhead, and their eyes met for a moment in recognition across a seething mass of the crowd. It was but for a moment, and then Kester was carried away; but in that moment there flashed into his eyes a look of such deadly, fiend-like hate as thrilled Lionel from head to foot. It was a look that once seen could never be forgotten. It chilled

Lionel's heart, and, for a time, even blotted out from his thoughts the sweet image of Edith West. He walked back to his hotel, gloomy, ill at ease, and oppressed with strange presentiments of some vague, far-off evil. Even after he fell asleep that look on his cousin's face oppressed him and would not be forgotten. He dreamt that Kester was pursuing him from room to room through the old house at Park Newton. As Kester came in at one door, with that terrible look in his eyes, he, Lionel, passed swiftly out at the opposite door, but on each door-handle, as he touched it, he left behind a stain of blood. The oppression of his dream grew at length too great to be any longer borne, and he awoke shivering with dread, and thankful to find that the blessed daylight was at hand.

CHAPTER V.

EDITH WEST.

HE London clocks were just striking midday as a gentleman drove up to the door of No. 6, Roehampton Terrace, Bayswater. It was Lionel Dering. He had reached London two days previously, but he would not venture to call on Edith West without first writing to her aunt and obtaining the requisite sanction. Mr. Garside had been dead nearly a year, but Edith and her aunt still continued to live together. In his note to Mrs. Garside, Lionel simply said that by a sudden change of fortune he was again in a position to pay his addresses to Miss West, and he solicited her permission to allow him to do so. Mrs. Garside was only

too happy to bid him welcome to Roehampton Terrace. Indeed, it is by no means improbable that she would have welcomed him had he gone to her on the same errand without a shilling in the world. She had discovered long ago that Edith was too faithful to the memory of her first love for there to be much hope that a second one would ever find a place in her heart. As Mrs. Garside had said to herself a score of times since her husband's death, "It would be far better for Edith to marry Mr. Dering without a penny than for her never to marry at all. Edith's fortune, if managed with economy, would suffice to keep them in tolerable comfort—not in London, perhaps, but in some quiet country place, or in some cheap corner of the Continent; and Edith is one of those girls who can make themselves happy anywhere."

Under these circumstances, it is hardly to be wondered at that Mrs. Garside was very glad to see Lionel Dering under her roof again, more especially as he did not come to her in the disagreeable guise of a poor man.

Tears came into her eyes as she held out her hand to him—genuine tears, for Mrs. Garside was one of those women who can weep on the slightest provocation. “It will be like new life to our darling Edith to have news of you once more,” she said.

“Then she has not quite forgotten me?” said Lionel, eagerly.

“Forgotten you, Mr. Dering! How little you know of our sex if you think it possible for us so soon to forget those to whom our young affections have once been given.”

“Is she—is Edith here in the house?” asked Lionel.

“She was in her own room only five minutes ago. I can understand your impatience, Mr. Dering, and will not keep you from her. I have refrained from saying a word to her about either your note or your visit. You shall yourself be the bearer of your own good tidings.”

Three minutes later Lionel found himself in the presence of Edith. Mrs. Garside opened the door and ushered him in. The room was

a very pleasant one, furnished with books, pictures, and curiosities of various kinds. At the farther end it opened into a small conservatory, which looked one dazzling mass of bloom as you entered the room. And there, sweetest flower of all, sat Edith, her face and figure clearly defined against a background of delicate ferns.

“Edith, dear, I have brought a long-lost friend to see you,” said Mrs. Garside, as she and Lionel entered.

Edith dropped her book, and started up in surprise. Lionel was half hidden behind Mrs. Garside, and for the moment Edith mistook him for a stranger. But he had not advanced three paces before she saw who he was, and in a moment she was as one transformed. Her mouth dimpled into smiles, tears came nestling into her eyes—tears of happiness—her heart beat fast, her cheeks flushed to the tint of the wild rose when its petals first open to the sun, and with a little inarticulate cry of joy she sprang forward to greet her lover. She sprang forward, and

then she halted suddenly, while a look of sadness clouded her face for a moment. With a sigh that ended in a half sob she held out her hand. Lionel grasped it in both his.

“How long you have been away!” she said, as her eyes met his. Mrs. Garside slipped discreetly out of the room, and shut the door softly behind her.

Lionel lifted Edith's hand to his lips and kissed it. Then he looked at her with the same eager, anxious gaze that she had bent on him—he looked and was satisfied. His heart told him that he was still loved as fondly as ever he had been. Edith, too, after that first hungry look, veiled her eyes modestly, but there was a wild whirl of happiness at her heart. Lionel drew her face up to his, and kissed her twice very tenderly. Then he led her to the sofa, and sat down beside her.

“Yes; I have been a very long time away,” he said at last. “But I am come to-day, Edith, to ask you to keep me by

your side through life—never more to let me wander from you.”

Edith, in the first shock of her surprise, was too happy to speak. But her fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on his hand, and her face, resting on his shoulder, where he had placed it, nestled still closer; her silent answer was more eloquent than any words.

“Edith, I left you—my letter told you why,” went on Lionel. “But all through the long dreary time when I was separated from you, my love for you never faltered, never wavered for one single moment. If I had never seen you again in this world, my heart’s last breath would still have been yours. Yesterday I was poor—to-day I am rich. Once more I can ask you, as I asked you three years ago, to be my wife. Do not tell me that I am asking for more than you can give.”

Edith’s faith in Lionel was so full and complete, her love for him so deep-rooted, that she never paused—as many young ladies

would have done—before giving him back the affection which had all along been his, to demand from him the reason for his apparent desertion of her three years before. In that first flush of new-born happiness it was enough to know that her lover had come back to her : the why and the wherefore of his leaving could be explained afterwards.

“ You know, Lionel, that my love is yours always—that it has been yours for a long long time,” said Edith, in accents that trembled a little in spite of herself. “ But I never received any letter from you after that last one dated from some far-away town in America.”

“ No letter !” exclaimed Lionel. “ Not one explaining my reasons for releasing you from your engagement ?”

“ Never a single line, Lionel.”

“ But I gave the letter into your uncle’s hands,” returned Lionel. “ He promised faithfully that he would give it you.”

“ He did not give it me,” answered Edith.

“Perhaps he kept it back because he thought it better that I should not see it.”

“He had no right to do anything of the kind,” said Lionel, sternly. “The letter was sacredly entrusted to him, and ought as sacredly to have been delivered to you.”

“Lionel, my uncle is no longer with us,” said Edith, gently. “You and I are together again. That redeems all. Let us never say another word about the letter.”

“What a villain, what a mean wretch, you must have thought me,” cried Lionel impulsively, “to break off my engagement without assigning you any reason! Without even a single word of explanation!”

“I thought you nothing of the kind,” said Edith, with decision. “I knew you too well not to feel sure that you must have good and sufficient reasons for acting as you did. Although you did not tell me what those reasons were—whatever may have been my disappointment at your silence—my faith in you never wavered.”

“But when weeks and months passed away, and you never heard from me——”

“I felt then that all was over between us ; felt it in a despairing, hopeless kind of way. But I cherished no resentment against you—none.”

“But surely your uncle and aunt had some explanation to offer?”

“They told me that, through the failure of a bank, you had lost the whole of your fortune, and that, consequently, you had resigned all pretensions to my hand.”

“And you?”

“I thought that you might have called to see me ; or, at least, have written to me. I could not understand why, if you still continued to care for me, you should choose to give me up simply because you had lost your fortune.”

“You could not understand it?”

“Indeed I could not. And I fail to understand it now. If you were poor, I was rich. What greater happiness could I have than to endow you with my plenty ? When I gave

you my love, it meant that I gave you everything I could call mine."

"You look at the question from a woman's point of view, Edith: I, from a man's."

"If I had lost my fortune as you lost yours, would you have given me up?" asked Edith.

"Certainly not."

"Nor I you. With me, to love and to be loved is everything. In comparison with that all else is as nothing."

"Edith, I could not come to you penniless, and ask you to become my wife. When I found myself a poor man, I had no profession to fly to; I was acquainted with no business. I was a great hulking good-for-nothing, able to plough and reap, and earn a bare crust by the sweat of my brow, and that was all. How was it possible for me to become a dependent on you for my daily bread?"

"You would not have been a dependent, Lionel. My money would have been yours, just as my love was yours."

"Still a woman's view, my dearest," said Lionel. "The noblest and the best, I at

once admit. Only, the world would never have believed that I had not married you for your fortune."

"You and I together, Lionel, could have afforded to set the world's opinion at defiance."

Lionel ended the argument with a kiss.

A fair, sweet English face was that which nestled so lovingly on Lionel's shoulder. Edith West had large liquid dark brown eyes. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were nearly black, but the thick wavy masses of her hair had no shade deeper than that of chestnuts in autumn. The tints of the wild rose dwelt in her cheeks. About her there was a freshness, a sweetness, and a delicate grace, like that of a breezy morning in spring, when flowers are growing, and birds are singing, and all nature seems glad at heart.

"You are in mourning, Lionel," said Edith, suddenly.

"Yes; I have just lost my uncle, Mr. St. George, of Park Newton."

"I never remember to have heard you speak of him."

"Probably not. I never even saw him, never had any communication with him whatever. Nevertheless, it is to him that I owe my fortune."

"It has come to you unexpectedly?"

"Entirely so. Three days ago I should have laughed at the idea of being my uncle's heir: now they tell me that I am worth eleven thousand a year."

"It sounds like a fairy tale," cried Edith. "What a strange man your uncle must have been!"

"When the will was read," returned Lionel, "my first thought was of you. I said to myself, 'Has Edith forgotten me? Has she given me up? Am I too late?' I trembled to think what the answer might be. Now I tremble no longer."

"It is sweet, Lionel, to have you here, and to know that you are my own again," replied Edith. "But how much sweeter it would have been if you had come to me when you

were poor, and had trusted everything to my love !”

A week passed away, each day of which saw Lionel Dering a visitor in Roehampton Terrace. Edith and he were much together. It was the happiest time they had ever known. All the freshness of their recent meeting was still upon them ; besides which, their long separation had taught them to value each other more, perhaps, than they would have done, had everything gone smoothly with them from the first. The weather, for an English winter, was brilliant, and they rode out every morning into the country. Of an evening, Edith, Lionel, and Mrs. Garside had the drawing-room all to themselves ; and although an “exposition of sleep” generally came over the elder lady after dinner, the young people never seemed to miss her society, nor were they ever heard to complain that the time hung heavily on their hands.


They were very happy. They had so much

to tell each other about the past—so many golden day-dreams to weave of what they would do in the future! Edith could never hear enough about Lionel's life at Gatehouse Farm, and about his adventure with Tom Bristow; while Lionel found himself evincing a quite novel interest in the well-being of sundry ragged-schools, homes for destitute children, and other philanthropic schemes of whose very existence he had been in utter ignorance only a few days before.

But everything must come to an end, and after a time there came a summons from Mr. Perrins. Lionel was wanted down at Park Newton. The old lawyer could go on no longer without him. So Edith and he were compelled to bid each other farewell for a week or two. Meanwhile, the post was to be the daily medium for the interchange of their vows and messages.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRST DAYS AT PARK NEWTON.

HE dining-room at Park Newton. A cosy little table, with covers set for two people, was drawn up near the fire. The evening was cold and frosty. The wax-candles were lighted, the logs on the hearth burned cheerily. A large Indian screen shut in this end of the room from the wilderness of gloom and desolation beyond ; for the dining-room at Park Newton would accommodate fifty or sixty guests with ease. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to ten minutes past seven. Lionel Dering was growing impatient.

“Perrins is generally punctuality itself,” he

said. "What can have detained him? I hope he is not ill."

He was on the point of ringing the bell, and sending the servant with a message to the lawyer's room, when Mr. Perrins came in. With many apologies for being late, he sat down to table; but Lionel saw at once that he was bursting with some important news. As soon as the first course was served, and the servant had left the room, Perrins began.

"I have some very startling information for you, Mr. Dering," he said. "My late arrival at table is owing to a certain discovery which I made about an hour ago."

"I hope you are not going to tell me that my eleven thousand a year is all moonshine," said Lionel, as he helped the lawyer to some clear soup.

"No, no, Mr. Dering. The news I have to tell you is not quite so bad as that, and yet it is bad enough in all conscience. While going through some of your uncle's papers this afternoon—you know what a quantity of them there are, and in what disorder he kept

them—while engaged upon this necessary duty, I discovered—what think you, sir? what think you?”

“Another will, I suppose,” said Lionel, slowly.

“Not another will, but a codicil, sir; a codicil to the will with whose provisions we are already acquainted; in the handwriting of the testator himself, witnessed in due form, and dated only three months ago!”

“And what may be the contents of this important document?” asked Lionel, as he crumbled his bread with apparent indifference.

“The contents are these: Should you, Lionel Dering, die unmarried, or without lawful issue, the whole of the property bequeathed you by your uncle’s will reverts to your cousin, Mr. Kester St. George, or to his children, should you be the longer liver of the two.”

“Is that all?” said Lionel, with a sigh of relief.

“All, sir! Quite enough, too, I should say, if I were in your place.”

"Nobody can touch the property as long as I live."

"Certainly not."

"Then a fig for the rest! Shall I send you a sole or some stewed eels?"

"It is quite a relief to me to find how coolly you take my news; though it is true your uncle could not well have made the contingency of your cousin's inheriting a more remote one."

"Tell me," said Lionel, "have you either seen or heard anything of Kester since my uncle's death?"

"I have heard from him, but not seen him. He wrote to me a few days after your uncle's funeral, asking me to send him an abstract of the contents of the will. He gave an address in Paris, and I answered his letter by return of post."

"An address in Paris!" exclaimed Lionel. "That is very strange. I never felt more positive of anything than that my cousin Kester passed me on Westminster Bridge on the very night of my uncle's funeral."

“A coincidence, my dear sir, nothing more,” said the lawyer, cheerfully. “Such things happen every day in London. It would almost seem as if every man had his double—a sort of unknown twin-brother—somewhere in the world.”

Lionel pursued the subject no farther, but he was none the less convinced in his own mind that it was Kester, and no one but him, that he had seen. Could he ever forget the look of undying hatred that shone out of his cousin's eyes?

“You have not yet advised Kester of the contents of the codicil?” he said at last.

“I have not had time to do so. I purpose writing to him this evening: unless you wish me to defer doing so until you have satisfied yourself as to the authenticity of the document.”

“My dear sir, if you are satisfied that the document is genuine, that is enough for me. Write to my cousin, by all means, and as soon as possible. By-the-by, you may as well give

me his address. I shall probably drop him a line myself."

"I may as well tell you," said Mr. Perrins, as he gave the address, "that the balance of six thousand and odd pounds, which I found to your uncle's credit in his bank pass-book at the time of his decease, represents, with the exception of a few shares in one or two public companies, the accumulated savings of Mr. St. George's lifetime."

"What! out of an income of eleven thousand a year?"

"Even so. When your uncle died, everybody who had known him, and who knew his simple, inexpensive mode of life, said: 'He must have saved a hundred thousand pounds at the very least.' But the reverse of that has proved to be the fact. In going through Mr. St. George's papers, I found numerous receipts for very large donations made by him to different charities. He seems to have received his rents with one hand and to have given them away with the other. In fact, your uncle was one of those unknown phi-

lanthropists of whom the world hears nothing, but whose wealth, like a bounteous stream, diffuses countless blessings among the sick and poor."

"And yet," said Lionel to himself, "this was the man who refused to forgive his own sister because he fancied that she had married beneath her!"

Mr. Perrins went off to bed at an early hour, after indulging in a due modicum of choice old port; but Lionel sat up till far into the small hours, with no companion but his favourite meerschaum.

His musings were very pleasant ones. How could they be otherwise? Not till to-day had he seemed to realize to the full all that was implied by his sudden change of fortune. In London he was nobody, or next to nobody; one rich man among ten thousand. Here, at Park Newton, he was lord and master of everything. This gray old mansion, with its wide sweep of park, and its noble trees which might be counted by hundreds, were all his, with many a fair and fruitful farm that now

lay sleeping under the midnight moon. To the gracious shelter of that stately old roof he would in a little while bring his bride. There would their lives gradually wear themselves away in a round of daily duties, edged with a quiet happiness that never tires. In one or other of those rooms their last breath would ebb away; in the long gallery upstairs two more portraits would be added to the line of dead and gone ancestors. And then would come the day when a new master, his son, would reign at Park Newton, who would, in his turn, bring home a fair young bride, and would dream, perchance in that very room, in the dim years to come, dreams the like of those which the brain of Lionel Dering was shadowing forth to-night among the smoke-wreaths that floated slowly upward from his pipe.

But before that time should come there was, he hoped and thought, a long and happy future in store for himself and Edith. As he passed with his candle through the dim picture-gallery on his way to bed, each one of

the old portraits seemed to greet him with a grim smile of welcome. With a queer, half-joyous, half-superstitious feeling at his heart, he turned at the gallery door. "Bon soir, messieurs," he said, with a bow to the silent crowd that seemed watching him so intently, "I hope—after a time—to form one of your pleasant society."

Lionel was up betimes next morning, and took a stroll round the house and shrubberies before breakfast. Park Newton dated from the era of William and Mary, and had little to boast of in the way of architectural magnificence. It was built of brick, with a profusion of stone copings, and mullions, and twisted chimneys. But its walls were now gray and venerable with age, powdered with lichens and delicate fairy mosses, and clasped about here and there with clinging tendrils of ivy. Everything about it was old and homelike. It had an air of stately comfort which seemed to carry back the mind instinctively to the days of periwigs and ruffles, of clouded canes and buckled shoes; before we English

had become the gadabout race we are now ; when a country gentleman's house was his home the year round, and country roads were altogether impassable in bad weather.

Lionel had not been many hours at Park Newton before he began to have visitors. The county families and neighbouring gentry who had known the late Mr. St. George either called or left their cards. Lionel was young and unmarried, and would be a decided acquisition to the limited circle of Midlandshire bachelors : that is to say, of eligible bachelors. Of ineligible bachelors there were always enough and to spare. But the advent of such a possible prize—of a bird with such splendid plumage as the new owner of Park Newton—was enough to send a pleasurable thrill through all the dovecotes within a circuit of twenty miles. Of the existence of a certain young lady, Edith West by name, nothing, of course, was known or suspected.

One of the first to call at Park Newton,

and introduce himself to Lionel, was the Reverend John Wharton, the vicar of Duxley. Mr. Wharton was an octogenarian, but hale and hearty ; as far as appearances went, he seemed likely to last for another twenty years.

“ My having known your uncle, the late Mr. St. George, must be my apology for intruding upon you so soon,” he said, as he shook Lionel warmly by the hand. “ And not your uncle only, but your grandfather also. And now I should like to know you.”

“ You are very kind,” said Lionel. “ And I appreciate the honour you have done me.”

“ There was another member of the family, too, whom I recollect very well,” said the vicar, as they sat together in the library. “ I refer to your mother.”

“ Did you know my mother ?” asked Lionel, eagerly.

“ I did indeed. I remember her first as a sweet slip of a girl, playing and romping about the house and grounds. Then I missed her for three or four years while she was away at school. Then she came back, a sedate young

lady, but very, very pretty. How fond your grandfather was of her! But he never forgave her for running away and marrying your father—never, that is, until he lay dying.”

“Do you mean to say, sir, that my grandfather ever did forgive my mother?”

“Certainly he forgave her, but not till he lay on his deathbed. I was in the room at the time and heard his words. Taking your uncle’s hand in his, your grandfather said—and his words came very slowly and feebly:— ‘Arthur, life and its duties look very different, as I lie here, from what they did when I was in health. It lies on my conscience that I never forgave poor Dorothy. It’s too late to send for her now, but send her my blessing after I’m gone, and say that I loved her to the last.’ He shut his eyes, and was silent for a little while. Then he spoke again. ‘Arthur,’ he said to your uncle, ‘is it your intention ever to marry?’ ‘I shall never marry, father,’ was the answer. ‘Then who’s to have Park Newton, after your time?’ ‘It will not go out of the family, you may depend

upon that, father,' said your uncle. 'Some time or other it will have to go to one of the two boys,' resumed your grandfather; 'either to Dorothy's boy, or to Geoffry's son, Kester. Now I don't want to tie you down in any way, Arthur, but I confess I should like Dorothy's lad to have Park Newton. He could change his name to St. George, you know. Young Kester might have a life allowance out of the estate of two or three thousand a year, and there would still be enough left to keep up the old place in proper style. I feel that I have acted wrongly to Dorothy. There is some reparation due to her. If I thought that her boy would one day have the estate, I think I should die happier.' 'Father, it shall be as you wish,' said Arthur St. George, solemnly."

"A promise that was made only to be broken," said Lionel, bitterly. "I have heard my mother say that the first intimation she had of my grandfather's death was derived from the columns of a newspaper. Further than that, my uncle Arthur never wrote a

single line to my mother ; never would even see her ; never hold any communication with her, direct or indirect, to the last day of her life."

" You shock me," said the old clergyman. " Can that indeed be true ?"

" I tell you, sir," said Lionel, " that this is the first time I ever heard of any such wish having been expressed by my grandfather. Two months ago I had no more expectation than you had of ever coming into the Park Newton property. My cousin Kester was always looked upon as the heir."

" He was, greatly to my surprise, knowing what I knew. Your uncle adopted him and brought him up as his own son."

" And, had it not been for some mysterious quarrel that took place between my uncle and my cousin, Kester St. George would undoubtedly at this moment have been the owner of Park Newton."

" What you say seems only too probable," said the vicar. " And yet I always looked upon Mr. St. George as one of the most con-

scientific of men, as he was, undoubtedly, one of the most charitable."

"A pity that in this case his charity did not begin nearer home," said Lionel. "That must have been a terrible quarrel," he added presently, "which could induce my uncle to alter the determination of a lifetime, and leave the property away from my cousin."

"True," said the vicar. "I have often wondered of what nature it could be. But Mr. St. George never spoke of it to any one. He was a very close man in many ways."

There was much food for thought in what Mr. Wharton had just told Lionel. "My grandfather intended me to have Park Newton, and I've got it," he said to himself, after the vicar had gone. "But it was also his wish that Kester should have two or three thousand a year out of the estate. I'll write to Perrins to know how it can be done."

Mr. Perrins had gone back to London a few hours previously. Lionel wrote to him by that night's post. Next morning but one

he had the following answer: "By the terms of your uncle's will and codicil you have no power to make any such allowance out of the estate as the one suggested by you. You can, of course, make any allowance you may please, and to anybody, privately, and as a gift out of your own pocket; but it is not competent for you to burden the estate with any charge of such a nature."

Would his cousin accept three thousand a year from him as a gift? It was a delicate proposition to put to a man circumstanced as was Kester St. George.

Lionel had not been many days at Park Newton when he was called upon by Mr. Cope, the banker, with whom came Mr. Culpepper of Pincote.

Mr. Cope was the senior partner in the firm of Sugden and Co., the well-known bankers of Duxley. The late Mr. St. George had had an account with the firm for twenty years, which account Mr. Cope was desirous of still retaining on his books, with nothing

but a simple alteration of the customer's name.

Squire Culpepper was a friend of Mr. Cope, and had been an intimate friend of Mr. St. George ; consequently, it was only natural that he and the banker should drive over to Park Newton together. Lionel gave them a hearty welcome. The banker was successful in the particular object of his visit, and was further gratified by Lionel's acceptance of an invitation to dine with him, *en famille*, the following day.

"Pincote ought by rights to have been your first place of call," said Mr. Culpepper to Lionel as he was bidding him good-bye. "But Cope here has stolen a march on me, as usual. However, I'll forgive him if you'll come and see us at Pincote before this day week."

Lionel laughed and promised.

Mr. Cope was a heavily-built, resolute-looking man of middle age, with a brusque business manner, which had become so confirmed in him by habit that he could not

throw it off in private life. He had neither the education nor the manners of a well-bred gentleman, but he inspired respect by the shrewdness of his intellect, and a certain innate force of character which made itself felt by all with whom he came in contact. His father had originally been office-boy to the firm of Sugden and Co., but, in the course of thirty years, had gradually worked his way up to the honourable post of managing clerk. Ultimately, three or four years before his death, he had been elevated to a junior partnership. Already young Horatio Cope, although merely filling the position of an ordinary clerk in the bank, had displayed such natural aptitude as a financier that, when his father died, the vacant post was at once given him, and the firm had never had reason to regret the choice thus made. As time went on, the two oldest members of the Sugden family died within a few months of each other. Two or three years later the youngest of the three brothers was accidentally drowned. Of the original firm there then were left but

two young men, of three or four and twenty, cousins, who knew little or nothing about the business, who were rich enough to live without it, and who preferred a life of ease and pleasure to the cares and toils which must devolve on those who would successfully steer a large financial concern through the troubled waters of speculation. In this crisis all that could be done was to fall back on Horatio Cope. He was master of the situation, and he knew it. The result was that he was offered a partnership in the firm on equal terms with the two cousins. They were to supply the capital necessary for the conduct of the business, but the entire management was to devolve on him. All this had happened several years ago; and in Duxley and its neighbourhood few men were better known, or more generally esteemed, than Mr. Cope.

He was a very proud man, this heavy, awkward-looking, middle-aged banker. His secret ambition was to obtain a footing among the county families of Duxley and its neigh-

bourhood, and to be treated by them, if not exactly as an equal, yet with as near an approach to that blissful state of things as might be. But, somehow, notwithstanding all his efforts, the old plebeian taint seemed still to cling to him. The people among whom it was his highest ambition to live and move simply tolerated him, and that was all. He was rich, and, to a certain extent, was still a rising man. He could be made use of in many ways. So he was invited to their state dinners, and sometimes to their more private balls and parties; but, for all that, he felt that he did not belong to them—that he never could belong to them—that he stood outside a magic circle which to him must be for ever impassable. It was only by slow degrees, and after a long time, that these disagreeable truths were brought fully home to the banker's mind. But when he did realize them, he bethought himself that he had a son.

Mr. Cope's stanchest friend and best ally was, undoubtedly, Squire Culpepper, of Pin-

cote. It had been the banker's good fortune, some thirty odd years ago, to be in a position to do an essential service to Titus Culpepper, at that time an impecunious young man, without a profession, and with no prospects in particular ; and the squire, when he afterwards came into his property, was not the man to forget it. At Pincote the banker was ever a welcome guest ; and if any one had asked the squire to point out the man whom he believed to be his best friend, that man would undoubtedly have been Horatio Cope.

It was a great step in Mr. Cope's favour to be so taken in hand by a man like Mr. Culpepper, who, although only moderately rich, and a commoner, was the representative of one of the most ancient and respected families in the county, and could, in fact, show a pedigree older by two centuries and a half than that of the great Duke of Midlandshire himself. Squire Culpepper had only one child, a daughter ; and it seemed to Mr. Cope that it would be an excellent thing if a match could be brought about between his son and the

young lady in question. By marrying Miss Culpepper, his son would at once secure a position in society such as he himself could never hope to attain ; and if, in addition, the young man could be smuggled into parliament, and could succeed in making one tolerably good speech there, why, then he thought that the great ambition of his life would be as near fulfilment as it was ever likely to be in his time. By what occult means Mr. Cope succeeded in inducing the squire to so far overcome the prejudices of caste as to agree to the marriage of his daughter with the grandson of a man who had lighted the fires and swept out the offices of Sugden's bank, was best known to himself. But certain it is that he did succeed ; and the match was arranged, and the pecuniary conditions agreed upon, before either of the two persons most interested so much as knew a word about it.

Squire Culpepper, at this time, was from fifty-five to sixty years old. He was a short, wiry, keen-faced man, with restless, fidgety ways, and a firm belief in his own shrewd-

ness and knowledge of the world. Except when dressed for dinner, his ordinary attire was a homely suit of shepherd's plaid, with thick shoes and gaiters. His head-gear was a white hat, with a black band, generally much the worse for wear. The squire's shabby hats were known to everybody. His tongue was sharp, and his temper hasty, but he was as sweet and sound at heart as one of his own Ribstone pippins.

Mr. Cope had a fine, handsome modern-built house just outside Duxley. When Lionel arrived, he found his host in the drawing-room waiting to receive him. The squire had not yet come. When he did arrive, he was half-an-hour past his time. He apologized, on the ground that he had been to a sale of cattle some twenty miles off, and had not been able to get back earlier. It was obvious to Lionel, and doubtless to Mr. Cope also, that the squire had been drinking—not inordinately, by any means, but just enough to make him more merry and talkative than

usual. After dinner, some splendid old port was put on the table; and it seemed to Lionel that the banker, while drinking nothing but an innocuous claret himself, kept pressing the decanter of port on the squire's attention oftener than was at all necessary, and seemingly of set purpose. The squire, nothing loath, smacked his lips, and drank glass after glass with evident gusto. As a consequence, he became more merry and communicative than ever. Had Lionel known at the time what a very rare occurrence it was for the squire to allow himself to become, even in the slightest degree, the worse for wine, he might have asked himself whether the banker's object was not to obtain from him, while in that talkative mood, certain information which it would have been hopeless to expect him to divulge at any other time. But Lionel, knowing nothing of this, was entirely in the dark as to what Mr. Cope's object could possibly be.

“Did you buy any stock at Cottingly, to-day?” asked the banker.

"Not a single hoof," answered the squire. "The prices were ruination. I'll keep my money in my pocket, and wait for better times."

"You know Cottingly, don't you?" he asked presently of the banker.

"Pretty well," answered Mr. Cope.

"Do you know Drake and Harding, the architects?"

"I've heard of the firm—nothing more. But if you want an architect, there's a clever young fellow here in Duxley."

"I know him. His name's Beakon. He's quite a fool."

"Quite a fool, is he?" said the banker, equably. "So be it."

"I've proved it, sir—proved it. No, Drake and Harding are the men for my money. Everything's settled. They'll bring the plans over to Pincote on Wednesday afternoon. If you have nothing better to do, you may as well drive over and help me to decide on the most suitable one."

"The plans! What plans?" said Mr.

Cope, in astonishment. "You forget that I'm altogether in the dark."

"Why, what plans could I mean but the plans for my new house?" cried the squire, as he refilled his glass. "I thought I had told you all about it weeks ago."

"This is the first time you have ever hinted at such a thing. But you don't mean to say that you are going to pull down Pincote!"

"I mean to say nothing of the kind," said the squire, peevishly. "But, for all that, I may be allowed to build myself a new house if I choose to do so, I suppose?"

"Certainly—certainly," said the banker, with a look of deprecation.

"I know what you think."

"I beg your pardon."

"I say, sir, that I know what you think," repeated the squire, with half-sober vehemence. "You think that because I've reduced my balance during the last six months from nine thousand pounds to somewhere about three thousand, and because I've sold all my

stocks and securities, that I've been making ducks and drakes of my money, and don't know what I'm about. But you never made a greater mistake in your life, Horatio Cope."

"You do me a great injustice, my dear squire. No such thought ever entered my mind."

"Don't tell me. I know what you bankers are."

Mr. Cope shrugged his shoulders and looked at Lionel with the air of an injured man.

"You don't believe in any speculation unless you've a finger in the pie yourself," continued the squire. "But other people have got their heads screwed on right as well as you. Why, man, I tell you that in less than six months from this time, I shall be worth an extra hundred thousand pounds at the very least."

"I'm truly delighted to hear it," said the banker, heartily. "No man will congratulate you with more sincerity than I shall."

"And you ought to be delighted to hear it, seeing that my daughter and your son will

soon be man and wife. But, mind you, I don't mean to turn miser with it. I intend to build, and plant, and dig. You know Knockley Holt, that bit of scrubby ground just outside the park?"

"I know it well."

"That's the spot where I intend to build my new house. The young folk can have Pincote. I don't intend to pull the old place down. After I'm gone, of course the new place will be theirs as well. And, if I live, I mean to make it a place worth having."

The squire refilled his glass. Mr. Cope, deep in thought, was absently drumming with his fingers on the table.

"Pincote is a very old place, is it not?" asked Lionel.

"It was built three hundred and fifteen years ago, and it's still as weather-proof as ever it was. But because one's great grandfather six times removed, chose to build a house, is that any reason why I shouldn't build another? At all events, I mean to try what I can do."

"The speculation you have hit upon must be something remarkable," said the banker, holding up a glass of wine before the lamp.

"It is. Something *very* remarkable," said Mr. Culpepper with a chuckle. "You would like to know the ins and outs of it, wouldn't you, now?"

"I should, indeed. It's too bad of you to keep such a good thing all to yourself."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the squire, in high glee. "I thought you would say that. You'll know all in good time, I dare say. But at present—it's a secret. That's what it is—a secret."

"Must have found a silver mine on his estate," said Mr. Cope, with a sly look at Lionel.

"Or a coal mine, which would be pretty much the same thing," returned Lionel.

The squire laughed loud and long. "Ah! you're a sharp lot, you bankers," he cried. "But you don't know everything." And then he winked at Lionel.

Lionel was not sorry when the evening

came to an end, and he found himself on his way back to Park Newton. "My first introduction to Midlandshire society is not very promising," he said to himself. "I hope to find it a little more entertaining by-and-by."

The squire, after being safely helped into his dog-cart, was driven home by his groom.

Mr. Cope, after his guests were gone, stood for a full quarter of an hour with his back to the drawing-room fire, ruminating over the events of the evening. Judging by the settled frown on his face, his meditations were anything but pleasant ones. "My worst fears are confirmed," he said to himself. "Culpepper has been induced to speculate on his own account. His balance at the bank yesterday was only two thousand and odd pounds,—and every security disposed of! Some swindler has got hold of him, and the result will be that he will lose every penny that he has invested. Build himself a new mansion, indeed! Unless he's very careful, the Court of Bankruptcy will soon be the only mansion he can claim the right to enter."

At this moment his son, Edward, entered the room.

“Have you been to Pincote to-day?” said the banker.

“I have just returned from there,” answered the young man.

“If I were you, Edward,” said Mr. Cope, looking steadily at his son, “I wouldn’t allow my feelings to become too closely entangled with Miss Culpepper. You’re only on probation, you know, and I wouldn’t—in short, I wouldn’t push matters so far as to leave myself without a door of escape, in case anything should happen to—to—in short, you understand perfectly what I mean.”

“You mean to say, sir——” stammered the young man.

“I mean to say nothing more than I’ve said already,” interrupted the banker. “My meaning is perfectly simple. If you cannot understand it, you are more stupid than I take you to be. Good-night.” At the door he turned. “Remember this,” he added. “When you enter an enemy’s country, never

burn your boats behind you. Bad policy." And with a final nod, the banker was gone.

"Now, what on earth does he mean with his 'enemy's country,' and his 'burning boats'?" said Edward Cope, with a comical look of despair. "I wish some people would learn to talk plain English."

CHAPTER VII.

KESTER ST. GEORGE.



ALTHOUGH Lionel Dering had obtained Kester St. George's address in Paris from Mr. Perrins, he had not yet written to him. He put off writing from day to day, hardly knowing, in fact, in what terms to couch his letter. He could not forget the look he had seen in his cousin's eyes during their momentary recognition of each other on Westminster Bridge. Were they to be as friends or as enemies to each other in time to come? was the question Lionel asked himself times without number. At last he decided not to write at all, but to wait till Kester should return to England, and then see him in person.

After a fortnight at Park Newton, Lionel ran up to town. As a matter of course, his first visit was to Edith. His second was to Mr. Perrins. From the latter he ascertained that a copy of the codicil had been duly sent to Kester at Paris, but had not yet been acknowledged. Lionel's next visit was to the Dodo Club, in Pall Mall, of which club he had ascertained that his cousin was a member. "Yes, Mr. St. George was in town—had been in town for some days," said the hall porter, in answer to his inquiry. "Most likely he would look in at the club in the course of the afternoon or evening." On the spur of the moment, Lionel sat down and wrote the following note, which he left at the Dodo for his cousin: "Dear Kester, I am in town and should much like to see you. Drop me a line saying when and where I can have the pleasure of calling."

A few hours afterwards he had the following answer: "Old fellow—Come and breakfast with me to-morrow. Eleven sharp. Shall be delighted to see you."

The address given was 28, Great Carrington Street, West, at the door of which house Lionel's cab deposited him as the clock was striking eleven next morning.

Kester St. George's chambers were luxuriously fitted up. They seemed an appropriate home for a man of wealth and fashion. Kester, attired in a flowery dressing-robe, with a smoking-cap on his head, was lounging in slippered ease before a well-furnished breakfast table. While there was no one to see him, he looked careworn and gloomy. He held an open letter in one hand, the reading of which seemed to have been anything but a source of satisfaction to him.

"Won't wait more than another week, won't he!" he muttered. "Not to be put off with any more of my fine promises, eh? If I were cleared out to-morrow, I couldn't raise more than a bare two fifty—just an eighth of the two thousand Grimble says he must have out of me before seven days are over: and he means it this time. If I could only raise five hundred,

that might satisfy him till I get a turn of luck. I wonder—as I’ve often wondered—whether Dering knows of that little secret down at Park Newton. How fortunate that he’s coming here this morning! I’ll pump him. If he knows nothing of it—why then, we shall see what we shall see. What with the diamonds and one thing or another, it ought to be good for five or six hundred at the very least. That must be Dering’s knock.”

“Dear boy! so pleased to see you! so glad to find you have not forgotten me!” were Kester’s first words, accompanied by a hearty shake of the hand. All traces of gloom and depression had vanished from his face. He looked as if he had not a care in the world.

“I am not likely to forget you, Kester,” said Lionel. “I should have hunted you up weeks back, but I heard that you were in Paris.”

“So I was in Paris—only got here three days ago. What will you take, tea or coffee?”

I've something fresh here in potted meats that I can strongly recommend."

Kester St. George at this time was thirty-three years old. He was a tall, well-built man, with something almost military in his bearing and carriage. He had bold, well-cut, aquiline features, a clear, pale olive complexion, and black, restless eyes. Black, too, jet black, were his thick eyebrows and his heavy, drooping moustache : but already his hair had faded to an iron-gray. He had one of those rare voices—low, soft, and persuasive, but perfectly clear, which are far more dangerous to a woman's peace of mind than mere good looks can ever hope to be. It was a voice whose charm few men could resist. Yet it was so uniformly dulcet, it was pitched so perpetually in a minor key that some people came at last to think that through all its sweetness, through all that pleasant flow of words which Kester St. George could command at will, they could detect a tone of insincerity—the ring, as it were, of counterfeit metal trying to pass itself off as good, honest

gold. But, then, some people are very fanciful—ridiculously so : and the majority of those who knew Kester St. George were satisfied to vote him a capital talker, and very pleasant company, and neither wished nor cared to know anything more.

“It must be eight or nine years, Li, since you and I met last,” said Kester, as he helped his cousin to some coffee.

“Yes, about that time,” said Lionel.

“You are so altered that I should hardly have known you again.”

“I suppose so,” answered Lionel. “But I should have known you anywhere.”

“How?”

“By your eyes.”

“Ah!” A pause, while Kester leisurely chipped an egg.

“Have you had any news lately from Uncle Lionel?”

“I have not had a letter from India for over six months.”

“What a fine old boy he is! Do you know, Li, I was quite jealous of the way he

took to you ; making such a pet of you, and all that ? He must be getting old now."

"I believe he is either fifty-nine or sixty."

"Quite time he left the service, and settled down at home for the remainder of his days. He must have made a pot of money out there, eh ?"

"I don't think Uncle Lionel is one of the money-making kind."

"He must have some scrapings somewhere. I only hope he won't forget his graceless nephew Kester, when he comes to make his will. By-the-by, you have a brother out there, haven't you ?"

"Yes. The only brother I have."

"Doing well ?"

"Very well."

"Ah, here comes Pierre with a couple of Digby chicks. Famous relish. Try one. And how do you like Park Newton, Li ?"

"I get to like it better as I become more familiar with it. It grows upon one day by day."

"Sweet old spot ! For years and years I

never dreamed that any one other than myself would be its master after my uncle's death."

"We all thought the same," said Lionel. "You will give me credit for sincerity when I say that no one could have been more surprised than I was by the contents of Uncle Arthur's will."

"I know it; I know it. From the day I quarrelled with my uncle, I felt that my chance was gone for ever. It was only right that you should be made the heir, vice Kester in disgrace. If there had been no such person as you in existence, the property would have been left either to your brother or to Uncle Lionel. If they had both been dead, Park Newton would have gone to some hospital or asylum. In no case would a single shilling have ever come to me." Kester spoke with exceeding bitterness, and Lionel could not wonder at it. But his gloom did not last more than a minute or two. He shook it off lightly. "Che sarà, sarà," he said, with a shrug and a laugh. Then he rose, and got his cigar-case. "Let us have a smoke," he

said. "After all, life in Bohemia is very jolly. It is pleasant to live by one's wits at the expense of other people who have none. Fools fortunately abound in this world ; while they are plentiful, men of brains need never starve." This was said with a sort of defiant cynicism that it pained Lionel to hear.

"Kester," he said, "something was told me the other day that I never heard of before ; something that affects you."

"Something that affects me ! What was it ?" His tone was abrupt and full of suspicion.

"Mr. Wharton, the vicar of Duxley, told me that when my grandfather lay dying, he expressed a wish that if Uncle Arthur should die without children, the estate should come to me ; but that an allowance of three thousand a year should be paid out of it to you as long as you lived."

"I have heard my uncle say many a time that my grandfather was in his dotage for months before he died," said Kester, contemptuously.

“Whether he was in his dotage or no, there is no doubt that such a wish was expressed by him. Strangely enough, his wish has come true as regards myself: why should it not come true in your case also?”

“Lionel Dering, what is it that you mean?”

“Simply this: Three thousand a year out of the Park Newton property belongs morally to you, and——”

“And you want to settle that sum on me?”

“I do.”

“You propose, in all seriousness, to give me, Kester St. George, three thousand a year out of your income of eleven thousand?”

“In all seriousness, that is what I propose to do.”

Kester's face flushed deeply. He got up, walked across the room, and stood looking out of the window for two or three minutes.

“No! a thousand times no!” he exclaimed at last with startling abruptness. “I cannot accept your offer.”

“Is not the sum large enough?” asked Lionel.

"Not one penny piece, Lionel Dering, will I ever accept at your hands!"

"But why not? What is your objection?"

"Do not ask me. I would not tell you if I could. Let it suffice that my objection is insuperable and—let us never talk about this again." He rang the bell violently. "Pierre, cognac and seltzer. Do you do anything in the racing line?" asked Kester in his lightest tone as Pierre left the room.

"Nothing. I'm as fond of a horse as any man, but I'm profoundly ignorant of racing, and I never bet."

"That's a pity, because I could have put you up to one or two good things for the spring meetings. Fine institution—betting," added Kester, as he lighted another cigar. "It is one of the pleasantest of our vices, when judiciously pursued. When we win, it is a source of double gratification: we not only put money into our own pockets, but we take it out of the pockets of other people."

"And when you lose?" said Lionel.

“To bear one’s losses like a man of the world and a gentleman is to prove that the teachings of philosophy have not been in vain.”

“May I venture to hope that, as yet, you have had no occasion to seek consolation in the teachings of philosophy?”

“I won four thousand over the last St. Leger.”

“For the present, then, the Stoics are at a discount.—Kester,” said Lionel, abruptly breaking off the subject, “you won’t object to come and see me at Park Newton?”

Kester was leaning back in his easy chair, watching the smoke-wreaths as they curled idly upwards from his cigar. His thick black eyebrows came together in a deep, meditative frown as he heard Lionel’s question. For a minute or two he did not answer.

“Frankly, no. I’ll come and see you,” he said at last. “Why shouldn’t I? It will pain me at first to go back to the old place as guest, where once I thought that I should be master. But, thank Heaven, I’m not one of

the most impressionable of men, and the feeling will soon wear off. Yes, Lionel, I'll come and see you."

Lionel was pleased that he had succeeded so far. "Perhaps, after a time," he thought, "I may be able to persuade him to accept the three thousand a year."

"You will keep up the old place in proper style, I suppose?" said Kester presently.

"I shall live very quietly—at least for some time to come," said Lionel.

"Which means, I suppose, that you will see very little company, and not rest satisfied unless you can save two-thirds of your income. That you will breakfast and dine in that ugly little parlour which overlooks the fishpond, and snore by night inside the huge four-poster in the Griffin-room."

Lionel laughed his careless, good-hearted laugh. "To one count of your indictment I can plead guilty," he said. "I certainly have both breakfasted and dined in the parlour overlooking the fishpond. But, on the other hand, I have certainly never slept in the

Griffin, which has been locked up ever since Uncle Arthur's death."

"Ah!" sighed Kester, and it sounded so like a sigh of relief or thankfulness that Lionel could not help noticing it. "No wonder you don't care to sleep in the Griffin," he added, after a brief pause. "With its oak-panelled walls, and its plumed bedstead that always put me in mind of a hearse, it used to give me a fit of horrors whenever I went into it; and yet my uncle would never sleep anywhere else."

It should be mentioned that the bedrooms at Park Newton were each of them individualized with a name—generally that of some bird, fish, or animal. Among others, there were the Dolphin, the Pelican, and the Griffin. Such had been the whim of one of the former owners of the place, and none of his successors had seen fit to alter the arrangement.

After a little more desultory conversation, Lionel rose to go. As he stood with his elbow resting on the chimney-piece, his eye

was attracted by a brace of duelling pistols which hung on the wall close by. They were old-fashioned, clumsy-looking weapons, but deadly enough, no doubt, in efficient hands.

“With permission,” said Lionel, as he took one down to examine. Kester took down the other. The one Lionel had taken was unloaded; the one in Kester’s hands loaded—a fact of which Kester was quite aware. The day was dull, and Lionel took his pistol to the window, that he might examine it more closely. Kester stood by the chimney-piece on the other side of the room. As he stood thus, a terrible temptation took possession of him. “What if you were to kill him where he stands!” something seemed to whisper in his ear: and for a moment his whole being shrank back aghast. But for a moment only.

“I could shoot him dead on the spot, put the discharged pistol into his hand the moment after he had fallen, and no one could say that he had not shot himself. Park Newton would then be mine, and I should be revenged.”

These thoughts flashed like lightning


through Kester's brain. The room and everything in it seemed to recede and fade into nothingness—everything except that silent black-clothed figure by the window. Kester's heart beat strangely. His breath came in hot gasps. There were blood-red motes in his eyes—blood-red motes falling everywhere. Mechanically, and without any conscious volition on his part, his right arm went up to a line with his shoulder. The barrel was pointed straight at Lionel's head.

He paused and trembled. In another moment, for good or for ill, would have come the climax. Suddenly, and without warning, Pierre, the velvet-footed, flung open the door. "A telegram for you, sir," he said. "The messenger is waiting."

The pistol fell from Kester's nervous grasp. Lionel looked up and was saved.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDNIGHT INTRUDER.

 LIONEL DERING found himself back at Park Newton three days earlier than he had intended. Mrs. Garside's sister in Paris having been suddenly taken ill, Mrs. Garside was telegraphed for to go over. She begged of Edith to accompany her. Lionel ran down with them as far as Dover, saw the M safely on board the steamer, and then bade them good-bye.

There being no longer any attraction for him in London, he decided to go straight through to Park Newton, as several matters there claimed his attention, and he went accordingly. He reached home about seven o'clock in the evening, much to the con-

sternation of Mrs. Benson, his housekeeper, who had not expected him till the end of the week, and who was in the midst of a high festival of scrubbing and scouring. Among other places, Lionel's bedroom was in a topsyturvy condition, and altogether unfit for occupation; so that Mrs. Benson, with many apologies, was compelled to ask him whether he would object to sleep in another room for that night only. Lionel, who was the most good-natured of men with his servants, made no objection to the change.

After his simple dinner was over, Lionel spent an hour among his letters and papers, and then took a cigar and his travelling cap with the intention of having a quiet smoke in the shrubbery. The night was clear and cold. There was no moon, but the stars were shining brightly. The footways were dry and pleasant to walk on, and Lionel lingered outside for nearly an hour, winding in and out among the maze of walks, and the thick clumps of evergreens, wherever his vagrant footsteps led him. His thoughts were with

Edith. He was thinking of the time, so soon to come, when they should pace those pleasant walks together ; when that dim old pile, which looked so majestic in the starlight, should call her mistress. There would be their home through all the happy years to come. His heart was full of solemn joy and gratitude : unbidden tears stood in his eyes : he felt that Heaven had been very kind to him. Then and there he registered a promise that the sick, the aged, and the poverty-stricken on his estate—and he knew already that they were many in number—should be made the special care of Edith and himself.

He was slowly retracing his steps when, as he turned the corner of a thick clump of holly only a few yards from the house, to his utter surprise he nearly stumbled over a man, who started up, from under his very feet as it seemed, and plunged at once into the depths of the shrubbery on the other side. For the moment Lionel was too much startled to think of pursuit, and a second thought convinced him that it would be useless to

attempt any. The trees were thickly planted just there, and that part of the grounds was quite strange to him ; besides, would it be worth his while to follow the intruder ? The man, whoever he might be, had evidently been hiding, and had certainly no business there ; but, in all probability, he was merely some young fellow from the village who had been sweethearting with one of the servants at the Hall, and had stayed beyond his time.

Nevertheless, when Lionel reached the house, he decided that, for once, he would look after the fastenings of the windows and doors himself. When he had satisfied himself that everything was secure, he took his candle and went off to his bed in the Dolphin. He was very tired and soon fell asleep. But Lionel had a trick—begotten of the time when he lay camping out in the wilds of North America, and had to sleep with his loaded rifle resting on his arm, and in constant dread of a surprise by hostile Indians—of waking up at the slightest noise at all out of the common way : waking up in a moment, com-

pletely, fully, and with all his wits about him. The old instinct did not desert him on the present occasion. He had been asleep for a couple of hours or so, when he was recalled in a moment from the land of dreams to life the most vivid and conscious, by the overturning of some heavy piece of furniture in the room immediately over that in which he was sleeping. He sat up in bed and listened with all his senses on the alert. But all was again as silent as the grave.

After two or three minutes he lay back in bed, still listening, but not so keenly as before ; and trying to make out, from his knowledge of the house, which particular room it was from whence the noise proceeded that he had just heard.

All at once it struck him—and the thought sent a chill through his heart—that the room in question was none other than the Griffin—none other, in fact, than the room in which his Uncle Arthur had died. The more he thought of it, the more certain he felt that he was right. It was the Griffin without

doubt. But what could any living being be doing in that room of all others, and at that hour of the night? The room had been left untouched since his uncle's death, and, as far as he, Lionel, was concerned, was likely to be so left for some time to come.

It was always kept locked, too, although the key was not taken away but left outside the door; and all the servants, from Mrs. Benson downwards, had a superstitious dread of entering it. How, then, account for the noise he had heard, which certainly came from that room and from no other? With such thoughts in his mind, to sleep again, for some time to come, was out of the question. A quarter of an hour, or it might be twenty minutes, passed thus, and the silence was still unbroken. Then there came a sound, and Lionel started involuntarily as he heard it. It was the faint sound of footsteps—the noise made by some one moving slowly and cautiously across the floor of the room above. It was so faint, so muffled, so subdued, that at any other time than the middle of the night,

and to any ears less keen than those now listening with all their might, it would have been altogether inaudible. If, for a moment, he had shivered at the recollection that it was in that very room his uncle had breathed his last—if, for a moment, some vague ghostly fancies had flitted across his mind, it was for a moment only. Involuntarily, and without any consciousness on his part, his mind seemed, in some strange way, to connect the dim half-seen figure that had melted before his eyes into the shrubbery, with the mysterious footsteps overhead.

It was the work of a very short time for Lionel to slip out of bed, light his candle, and partially dress himself. He had no weapon of any kind in his room, but, man against man, he was not afraid of any one ; and that there was more than one person upstairs seemed highly improbable. He opened his room door as noiselessly as possible, and stole out into the corridor. He had to traverse one long passage, ascend a flight of stairs,

and there, at the end of another passage, was the door of the room he was in quest of.

It was the state bedroom of the house, this room called the Griffin. None of the rooms near it were occupied : the servants all slept in the opposite wing. Had Lionel slept in his own room that night, the unknown intruder would have had one whole wing of Park Newton entirely to himself—a fact that was probably well-known and calculated upon. Along the chilly corridor and up the oaken staircase, lighted candle in hand, stole Lionel step by step, slowly and without noise. At the top of the staircase he paused and listened. Two or three minutes passed in silence the most profound. Had not his senses deceived him ? he asked himself. Was it, indeed, the sound of mortal footsteps that he had heard ? or nothing more than some of the vague, unaccountable noises, born of night and the darkness—moans, whispers, the creaking of doors, the rustling of ghostly garments—such as may be heard during the mute hours of

sleep in any old house in which several generations of people have lived and died?

Some such thoughts as these were wandering through his mind—he was still listening intently—when the candle he was carrying dropped down into the socket, flared up suddenly for a moment, and then went out. Stooping to place the candlestick on the ground, and turning his head as he did so, what was his surprise to see a thin, faint streak of light shining from under the door at the end of the corridor! The sight of this braced his nerves like a tonic. A few swift strides brought him to the other end of the passage. It was the work of a moment to turn the key and fling wide open the door.

The late Mr. St. George's bedroom was a large but gloomy apartment, panelled with black oak, and having in one corner a huge funereal-looking bedstead, plumed and carved, and with a quantity of faded gilding about it, that matched well with the faded colours of


the painted ceiling overhead. When Lionel flung open the door, an exclamation of surprise burst involuntarily from his lips. The cloaked figure of a man, with his back towards Lionel, and holding a dark lantern in one hand, was standing in front of a small cupboard or recess in the panelling—a hiding place evidently ; but what he was doing there Lionel had not time to see. A moment later and the lantern was shut, and he and the stranger were alone in the dark.

As Lionel sprang forward to seize him, the stranger turned to fly. As he did so, there was a noise of money falling to the floor. Lionel seized him by the cloak, but that came away in his hands. Then he grasped him again, this time by the shoulder, and held him firmly. With a growl like that of a wild beast suddenly trapped, the stranger turned on Lionel, and before the latter could guess what he was about, or could defend himself in any way, he jerked his right arm free, and swinging it round with all his strength, brought the butt-end of the pistol, which it

held, crashing down on Lionel's head. Twice in quick succession was the terrible blow repeated, and then Lionel fell heavily to the ground and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. PERCY OSMOND.

“E shall not be able to leave Paris for five or six weeks.” So wrote Edith West to Lionel Dering at Park Newton.

Mrs. Garside’s sister—her sister by marriage only—was dead. The house, plate, and furniture were to be sold, and Mrs. Garside had much to do. Edith, as a matter of course, must stay with her aunt. Lionel, if he wanted to see his promised wife, must go to Paris: and to Paris he decided that he would go.

The same post which brought him this letter brought him one from India, written

by his uncle, General St. George. The old soldier's letter ran as under :

“ MY DEAR NEPHEW,

“ Allow me to congratulate you on your good fortune, the news of which followed close upon the intimation of my poor brother's death. I can safely say that there is no one in whose hands I would sooner see the family estates than yours. I contracted a very warm affection for you during my last visit to England, and that feeling has not diminished with time. But you must change your name, my dear boy. I know that you are a St. George at heart, and you must be one in name also. However, that is one of the things that we can discuss fully when I see you again. Please Heaven, that will be before either you or I are many months older.

“ Yes, my dear nephew, it is even so. The old horse is nearly worn out at last. People begin to whisper that he is no longer equal to his work ; and although the sound of the trumpet and the clash of arms have still their

old charm for his ears, the day must shortly come when he will hear them for the last time. In brief, Lionel, putting aside what other people may think, I feel myself that I am getting creaky and out of repair, and a great longing has come over me to spend the few remaining days that may be left me somewhere near the dear old homestead where I first drew breath.

“I will write you full particulars in a week or two. Your brother Richard is in good health, and is prospering. I had a letter from him only a few days ago. As things have turned out, it is perhaps quite as well that he came out to India instead of you.

“Your affectionate uncle,

“LIONEL ST. GEORGE.”

“He shall live with us at Park Newton,” said Lionel to himself as he folded up the letter. “It will be like finding a second father to have dear old Uncle Lionel come and share our home.”

A few days later Lionel received a note

from Tom Bristow. It was addressed to Gatehouse Farm, and had been sent from thence to Park Newton, Tom not having heard of Lionel's change of fortune. It was dated from Egypt, and was written with Tom's usual brevity. "Health much improved. Hope to be back in England in about three months from now. Shall take early opportunity of looking you up. The dear old days at the farm are not forgotten." That was nearly all.

"He will be here in time for the wedding," said Lionel, as he read the note. "I should like Tom Bristow to be my best man on that important occasion."

Nearly a fortnight passed away before Lionel Dering was able to leave the house. The wound on his head was a very severe one, and for the first two days and nights he lay in bed, to all outward seeming more dead than alive. As soon as he was in a condition to do so he sent for the Duxley superintendent of police, and told him confidentially all that he knew of the affair. Lionel was strongly averse to

all unnecessary publicity, and was especially desirous that no mention of the case should be made in the local newspapers. Had he been asked to state his reasons for wishing to keep the matter so private, he would perhaps have found it difficult to do so. Nevertheless, the feeling to act thus was strong upon him.

It was proved, on investigation, that the intruder, whoever he might be, had obtained access to the house through one of the library windows. One of the panes had been cut out with a diamond, and the window then unfastened. Next came the discovery of a secret passage from the library to the late Mr. St. George's bedroom. Those among the servants who had been at Park Newton under the old régime denied all knowledge of the existence of any such passage, and their statements might well be true.

The passage in question was one of a kind by no means uncommon in houses built a couple of centuries ago. It was simply a very narrow staircase, built in the thickness of the

wall, and leading from the ground floor to the floor above. The entrance to it was behind a sliding panel in the bedroom; but both exit and entrance were so carefully hidden that a person might pass his whole life at Park Newton without ever suspecting the existence of such a place. One of Lionel's first acts, after a thorough exploration of the passage had been made, was to send for the bricklayers and have both entrance and exit walled up.

But the little closet or cupboard in the bedroom had still to be considered. It was nothing more than a small square opening in the wall; and, like the staircase, it was hidden behind the panelling, and secured still further by means of a secret spring. It was evident that the late Mr. St. George had known the secret of the cupboard, and had used the place as a safe depository for money and other valuables. It was equally certain that this latter fact must have been well known to Lionel's assailant; and there could be no doubt that the object of the midnight

raid had been to rifle the cupboard of its contents. Some testimony as to the quality of those contents had been unavoidably left behind in the hurry of flight. Three or four small diamonds, and a couple of sovereigns of recent coinage, were found scattered on the floor : but as to the further value of the property stolen there were no means of judging.

Lionel had no reason for suspecting any of the people immediately about him, nor did such a thought ever find a lodging in his mind. The more he considered the matter, the more certain he felt that the man of whom he had caught a glimpse in the shrubbery was really the thief. But even granting such to be the case, the mystery was no nearer solution than before. Whoever the man might be, he had got clear away without leaving the slightest clue behind him by which he might be traced.

Lionel's first visit, when he was able to get out of doors again, was to a little cottage on the outskirts of Duxley, where lived an old man, Joseph Nixon by name, who had been

body-servant to the late Mr. St. George, and to his father before him. Nixon was now living on a pension granted him by the family; and it seemed to Lionel that he would be more likely than any one else to have a knowledge of the hidden staircase, and the cupboard in the bedroom wall. He found the old man infirm in body but clear in mind. Yes, he said, in answer to Lionel's inquiries, he knew all about the staircase in the wall, and the little closet behind the panelling in his old master's bedroom. Mr. St. George, who was somewhat peculiar in his ways, was in the habit of keeping a considerable amount of ready money in the house, and used the cupboard as a secure place of deposit, known to himself and Nixon alone.

"But was there nothing besides money ever kept there?" asked Lionel.

"Yes, sir; there was a diamond necklace, and some other things as well," answered Nixon.

"It was rather a strange place in which to keep a diamond necklace, was it not?"

“Well, sir, this is how it was. When Mr. Arthur St. George was a young man, he was engaged to be married to a handsome young lady. The wedding day was fixed, and everything ready, when he made her a present of a diamond necklace. She wore it once only—at a grand ball to which he took her. Next day she was taken ill; a week later she was dead. Her friends sent back the necklace, and my master seemed as if he could never bear to part from it after that time. Many and many a time I’ve known him to sleep with it under his pillow.”

Here was a page of romance out of his uncle’s life that was quite fresh to Lionel.

“He was one o’ the old-fashioned sort of lovers, was Mr. St. George,” added Nixon. “He didn’t know what it was to change.”

“And are you certain that my uncle and yourself were the only two people who knew of the existence of the staircase and the cupboard? Try to remember. Think carefully before you answer.”

“It’s not in my knowledge,” answered the

old man, slowly, "that anybody knew about either of them places but my master and myself. Unless, maybe——"

"Yes—unless what?"

"Unless Mr. Kester St. George happened to know about them."

"And do you really think that my cousin Kester does know that there are two such places in existence?" asked Lionel after a pause.

"Now I come to think of it, sir, he does know about the cupboard. Going suddenly into the bedroom one day, without knowing that he was there, I found him standing by the cupboard, with the door open, and the diamond necklace in his hand. It was not my place to say anything, and it seemed no more than likely, at that time, that some day the necklace would be his own property. But, as regards the staircase, sir, I don't know as Mr. Kester was ever told about that."

There was nothing more to be learned, so Lionel took a kindly leave of the old man, who seemed as if he could not sufficiently ex-

press his delight at not having been forgotten by "the new master."

Lionel neither could nor would believe that Kester had had any hand in the midnight robbery. Nevertheless, he sent word next day to the chief constable of Duxley not to proceed any further with his investigation of the affair. In his letters to Edith he had been careful not to mention the matter in any way. It would only have frightened her, and could have done no possible good.

As soon as he was thoroughly recovered he set out for Paris. He had not seen Edith for several weeks, and longer separation was unendurable.

One morning there came a letter to Edith, in which Lionel stated that he should be in Paris twelve hours after the receipt of it. What a day of joyful expectation was that! Edith could neither read, nor work, nor even sit quietly and do nothing. All she could do was to wander absently from room to room, touching a few notes on the piano now and again, or gaze dreamily out of the windows,

or feed the noisy troop of sparrows that assembled daily on the window-sill for their accustomed bounty. She sent out for a Railway Guide that she might be enabled to follow Lionel step by step on his journey. "Now he is at Dover," she said to herself. A little while later, "Now the steamer is nearly at Calais." Later still, "Now he has left Calais. Half his journey is over. In six more hours he will be here."

"Come and have some tea, child," said Mrs. Garside. "I declare you look quite worn and anxious. Mr. Dering will think I've been working you to death."

Mrs. Garside was very glad on her own account that Lionel was coming. The forms and processes of French law in connection with the property left her by her sister troubled her exceedingly. She knew that she could count on Lionel's good-natured assistance in extricating her from sundry perplexities into which she had fallen.

How slowly the hours went by ; as hours, when they are watched, always seem to do !

Mrs. Garside began to prophesy. "Perhaps the train will be delayed," she said. "Perhaps he will think it too late to call. Perhaps we shall not see him till midday to-morrow." To all which Edith could only respond with a doleful "Perhaps."

"But for all that," said Mrs. Garside, "we will have dinner ready for him to the minute. Men are never good-tempered when they are hungry. Always bear that little fact in mind, Edith, when you get married."

So a choice little repast was prepared, and Edith went out and bought some flowers with which to decorate the table ; then the candles were lighted ; and after that they could only sit and wait.

By-and-by a cab came rattling into the courtyard. Then there came the sound of welcome footsteps on the stairs, and next moment Lionel was with them.

What two happy hours were those before the time came for them to bid each other good-night ! But, then, what a little suffices to make us happy when we are in love ! Kind-

hearted Mrs. Garside was happy in the happiness of Edith, and in the freshness and change which Lionel's welcome arrival brought with it. Edith and Lionel asked nothing more for the time being than to be able to see each other, and speak to each other, and to spell out that silent language of the eyes which has often a meaning far more deep and heartfelt than any words can convey.

In Paris that year the spring seemed to come earlier than usual. Already the Bois was beginning to clothe itself in a mantle of tenderest green. The daylight hours were warm and bright; hardly a cloud was to be seen in the sky. All the gay world of Paris was on the *qui vive*. It was a splendid moving panorama, framed with flowers and softest buds just bursting into leaf. To the fancies of Edith and Lionel it almost seemed as if all this glamour and brightness had been devised by some kind fairy godmother for their especial behoof, simply because they were under love's sweet witchery, and that it would all vanish like a dream the moment

they two should have quitted the scene. They spent hours in the Louvre looking at the pictures. They spent more hours on the pleasant Boulevards, jostled by troops of pleasure-seekers. But it is more than probable that, as sightseers, they saw very little indeed. They moved like dreamers in the midst of a crowd, like denizens of a more etherealized world, who breathed, as of right, a finer atmosphere, and in whose veins flowed the only true elixir of life. It was a season of happiness, pure and unalloyed. They saw nothing—not even in their dreams had they any prevision—of the huge black cloud whose edge already touched the horizon, whose sable folds would soon shut out the sunshine and the flowers, but whose thunders would smite in vain the strong pure rock of their mutual love.

By the end of a fortnight, thanks to the assistance given by Lionel, Mrs. Garside's legal difficulties were at an end. After a few last lingering days in Lutetia the Beautiful, they went back to London together. Lionel saw the two ladies safely housed in Roehamp-

ton Terrace, and then bade them farewell for a little while. The marriage was to take place in June, and there was much to be done before that time.

Having some purchases to make, Lionel stopped in London for a few hours, after leaving Edith, before continuing his journey home. He had kept telling himself, as he came along in the train, that he must not fail to call on Kester before going back to Park Newton. He wanted his cousin to fix a date for his promised visit. But when London was reached and his business done, he still felt unaccountably reluctant to pay the call. He shrank from making any inquiry of himself as to the origin of this strange reluctance, but its existence he could not dispute. Was it possible that some half-formed and unacknowledged doubt was at work in his mind as to whether the man who had so brutally struck him down was any other than Kester St. George? If so, it was a doubt that never clothed itself with words even to himself. But, be that as it may, four o'clock was

reached; his train started at five, and Great Carrington Street was still as far away as ever.

His irresolution was brought to a sudden end at last. He was gazing absently into Colnaghi's window, when a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder, and his cousin's musical voice fell on his ear.

"What! in town again, old fellow? You might have let one know that you were coming."

All Lionel's half-shaped doubts vanished in a moment under the influence of his cousin's genial smile and hearty grasp of the hand. As he stood there his conscience pricked him that he should have wronged Kester for a moment even in thought.

"I have only just got back from Paris," he said. "I am glad to have met you, because I want you to fix a date for your promised visit to Park Newton."

Kester was not alone. His arm was linked in that of another man. "Before fixing anything," he said, "I must introduce to you my

particular friend, Mr. Percy Osmond.—Osmond, my cousin, Li Dering, of whom you have frequently heard me speak.”

The two men bowed.

“Is it possible,” asked Lionel, “that you are a brother of the Mr. Kenneth Osmond whom I met when in America?”

“Kenneth Osmond and I are certainly brothers,” answered the other.

“Then I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. Your brother and I travelled together for six months through some of the wildest parts of North America. I never met with a man in my life whom I esteemed more or liked better.”

“Look here,” said Kester. “We can’t stand jawing in the street for ever. My club’s not three minutes away. Let us go there and wet the talk with a bottle of fiz.”

Mr. Percy Osmond was about eight-and-twenty years old. He was of medium height and slender build, and of a somewhat effeminate appearance. He had good features,

and had rather fine black eyes, of which he was particularly proud. But there was a shiftiness about them, a restlessly suspicious look, as though the man at one time had been haunted by some terrible fear, and had never been able to forget it.

His face was closely shaven, except for a thin, silky, black moustache, which he wore with long waxed ends. He was foppishly dressed in the latest fashion, and displayed a profusion of jewellery. But there was something about him so arrogant and self-opinionated, something so coldly contemptuous of other men's feelings and opinions whenever they chanced to clash with his own, that Lionel had not been ten minutes in his company before he said to himself that Mr. Percy Osmond was very different from Mr. Percy Osmond's brother, and could never be included by him among the few men he numbered as his friends.

"So you want to pin me down to a date, do you?" said Kester as they sat down in the smoking-room at the club.

"I should certainly like to fix you, now that I am here," answered Lionel.

"How would this day fortnight suit you?"

"No time could suit me better. And if Mr. Osmond will honour me by coming down to Park Newton at the same time, I need hardly say how pleased I shall be to see him there."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," said Osmond. "Glad to run down to your place, especially as St. George is going. Am thinking of buying a quiet little country roost myself. Town life is awfully wearing, you know."

Kester laughed aloud. "Osmond would commit suicide before he had been in the country a month," he said. "He is one of those unhappy mortals who cannot live away from bricks and mortar. The shady side of Pall Mall is dearer to him than all the country lanes and hayfields in the world."

"You do me an injustice—really," said Osmond. "Some of my tastes are quite idyllic. No one, for instance, could be fonder

of clotted cream than I am. I never shoot, myself—haven't muscle enough for it, you know—yet I have a weakness for grouse pie that almost verges on the sublime."

"Or the ridiculous," interposed Kester.

"By-the-by, I hope you are not without a billiard-table at your place," said Osmond, with that affected little cough which was peculiar to him.

"We have a table on which you shall play all day long if you choose," said Lionel.

"Then I'll come. Country air and billiards: charming combination! Yes, you may expect to see me at the same time that you see St. George."

He made a memorandum of the date in his tablets; and after a little further talk, he shook hands with Lionel and went, leaving the two cousins together.

Kester looked after him with a sneer. "There goes another gilded fool," he said.

"I thought you introduced him to me as your particular friend," said Lionel.

"I called him my particular friend because

he is rich. I can't afford to call any poor man my friend."

"My reason for inviting him to Park Newton was partly because I thought it would please you to have him there at the same time as yourself, and partly out of compliment to his brother, whom I respect and like exceedingly."

"Don't mistake me. I am glad you have asked him down to the old place. As I said before, he is rich, and some day or other he may be useful to me. All the same, he's an awful screw, and thinks as much of one sovereign as I do of five."


"How long have you known him?" asked Lionel.

"For a dozen years at the least. When he was twenty-one he came in for a fortune of twelve thousand pounds. This he contrived to get through very comfortably in the course of a couple of seasons. Then came the climax. For two years longer he managed to pick up a precarious crust among the different friends and acquaintances whom he had

made during his more prosperous days. Then, when everybody had become thoroughly tired of him, he crossed the Atlantic. For the next four years he was lost sight of utterly. When heard of again, he had sunk to the position of marker in a billiard-saloon at New Orleans. After that, he was heard of in several places, but always in dreadfully low water. Then came the story of a murder in which he was said to be somehow mixed up, but nobody on this side seemed ever to get at the truth about it; and the next thing we heard about him was something altogether different. An old maiden aunt had died and had left the scape-grace eighty thousand pounds. Such as you saw him to-day, he turned up in London three months ago. Bitter experience has taught him the value of money. Still he has his weaknesses. What those weaknesses are it is my business just now to find out."

CHAPTER X.

MASTER AND MAN.

“ HALL I shut the window, sir? The evening is rather cold.”

It was Pierre Janvard, the body-servant of Mr. Kester St. George, who spoke. The place was a room at Park Newton, for Kester had come there on his promised visit. The same suite of rooms had been allotted to him that had been his during his uncle's lifetime—the same furniture was still in them: everything seemed unchanged. “Do you hear the bells, sir?” continued Pierre. “The village ringers are having their Wednesday evening practice. They always used to practise on Wednesday evenings, sir, if you re-

member. It seems only like yesterday since you left Park Newton."

To all this Mr. St. George vouchsafed no reply. He was dressing for dinner, a process to which he always attached much importance, and was just at that moment engaged with the knot of his white tie. He was evidently in anything but an amiable mood—a fact of which Pierre was perfectly aware, but did not seem to mind in the least.

"Do you remember, sir, talking to me one evening when you were dressing for dinner, just as it might be now, of what you would do, sir, and what alterations you would make, when Park Newton was all your own? You would build a new wing, and a new entrance-hall, and cut a fresh carriage-drive through the park. And then the stables were to be rebuilt, and the gardens altered and improved, and——"

"Pierre, you are a fool," said Mr. St. George, with emphasis.

The ghost of a smile flickered across the valet's staid features, but he did not answer.

Mr. St. George looked at his watch. It still wanted half an hour to dinner-time. He felt in no humour for seeing either Osmond or his cousin till they should all meet at table. He would stroll as far as the little summer-house on the Knoll, and look once more on a scene that he remembered so well. He put on a light overcoat and a soft hat, and, going leisurely downstairs, he went slowly through the picture-gallery and the conservatory, and let himself out by a side door into the grounds at the back of the house. Every step that he took was haunted for him with memories of the past. His heart was full of bitterness and resentment that Fate, as he called it, should have played with him at such a terrible game of cross purposes, and have ended by winning everything from him. "If I had never been brought up to look upon it as sure to be one day my own," he said, "I could have borne to see it another man's without regret. Pierre is right: I did dream and plan and say to myself that I would do this thing and that thing when the time came for

me to be master here. And now I, Kester St. George, am nothing better than a pauper and a blackleg, and am here on sufferance—an invited guest under the very roof that ought in justice to be mine!”

He took the winding path through the plantation that led to the summit of the Knoll. The summer-house was unlocked as usual. He went in and sat down. The scene before him and around him was very pleasant to look upon, lighted up, as it was just then, by the fading splendours of an April sunset. The Hall itself, clasped tenderly round with shrubberies of softest green, lay close at his feet. Far and wide on either side stretched the Park, with its clumps of noble old trees that had seen generation after generation of the St. Georges come and go like creatures of a day, and still flourished unchanged. Away in the distance could be seen Highworth and other prosperous farms, all part and parcel of the Park Newton estate.

“All this belongs of right to me,” muttered Kester to himself, as his eyes took in the

whole pleasant picture ; “ and it would have been mine but for——”

He did not finish the sentence even to himself, but the gloom on his face deepened, and for a few moments the unhappy man sat with drooping head, seeing nothing but some terrible picture which his own words had conjured up.

He roused himself from his reverie with a sigh. The sun was nearly lost to view. Eastward the glooms of evening were beginning to enfold the landscape in their dusky wings. Blue curls of smoke wound slowly upward from the twisted chimneys of the Hall. A few belated rooks came flying over the Knoll on their way to their nests in the wood. The picture was redolent of homelike beauty and repose. “ Only one life stands between me and all this,” he muttered, as his eyes drank in the scene greedily. “ Only one life. If Lionel Dering were to die to-night, I should be master to-morrow of all that I see before me.”

He rose and left the summer-house. He

could hear the clanging of the dinner-bell. It was time to go.

“Only one life. And what is the value of any one particular life among the thousands that are born and die every day? Who would miss him—who would regret him? No one. He is an isolated link in the great chain of humanity. He might die to-night, or to-morrow, or next day. Stranger things than that have happened before now.”

He pulled his hat over his brows and went slowly down the pathway, and was presently lost to view among the gloomy depths of the plantation.

Left alone, Pierre Janvard settled himself comfortably in an easy chair to enjoy the perusal of one of Mr. St. George's yellow-backed French novels. He was a thin, staid-looking man of fifty, decidedly more English than French in appearance. He was partially bald, and was closely shaven, except for two small whiskers of the kind known as “mutton chop.” What hair he had was thickly sprinkled with gray, and was carefully trained and

attended to. He had a good forehead, a rather large aquiline nose, and thin, firmly-cut lips. In his suit of well-brushed black, and his spotless white tie, he looked the model of a respectable and thoroughly trustworthy servant. He looked more than that. Had he been set down at a public dinner among a miscellaneous assemblage of guests, a stranger would probably have picked him out as a banker or a rich merchant, or might even have asked, and have been pardoned for asking, whether he were not some celebrated lawyer, or member of the Lower House. He spoke English with a French accent as a matter of course, but he could express himself as readily in one language as the other. He had a particularly quiet, noiseless way of going about his duties that many people might have liked, but which would have been intolerable to others. You never seemed to know that he was near you till you found him at your elbow.

Such as he was—this smug, respectable-looking valet—his antecedents were some-

what peculiar. His grandfather had been one of the sub-executioners of Paris during the terrible days of the Great Revolution. Later on, his father had for many years held the post of public executioner in one of the large towns in the south of France. Pierre himself had been intended for the same profession, and had, when a youth, assisted his father on more than one occasion in the performance of his ghastly duties. But the death of Janvard père brought a change of prospects. The widow was persuaded to come over to England and invest the family savings in the purchase of a small blanchisserie at the West End of London; and from that date Pierre's connection with his native country was a broken one.

Kester St. George's tastes were all luxurious ones. One of the first things he did after he came of age was to look out for a valet. Pierre Janvard was recommended to him by a friend, and he engaged him at once. The Frenchman had served him faithfully and well, had travelled with him, and had lived

with him at Park Newton up to the date of Kester's quarrel with his uncle. But when the whole of Kester's income was swept away at one blow, and he was thrown on the world without a sovereign that he could call his own, then Janvard and he of necessity parted. Their coming together again was quite a matter of accident. It so happened that, a few days after Kester had won heavily on a certain race, he encountered Janvard in the street. The Frenchman touched his hat, and Kester stopped and spoke to him. The result was that Janvard, who was out of a situation at that time, was re-engaged by St. George, whose old, luxurious tastes cropped up the moment he found himself in abundant funds. Those funds could not last for ever, and a season of impecuniosity had again set in ; but the bond between master and man had not again been broken.

Janvard stayed on with Mr. St. George. He was thoroughly trustworthy, or so Kester believed ; and he probably knew more of his master's secrets—more of certain shady tran-

sactions that were never intended to bear the light of day—than any other man living.

Janvard had one relation in England—a sister—with whom he was on terms of close and affectionate intercourse. Both he and his sister were unmarried, and they both intended to remain so. Madame Janvard—she was called madame out of compliment to her age, which was nearer fifty than forty—kept a small boarding-house for her countrymen in a narrow street no great distance from Leicester Square. She had saved money, had madame. So had her brother. And the secret ambition of the two was to unite their fortunes, and start together as proprietors of a first-class hotel.

Pierre's holidays and leisure time, when he was in town, were always spent with his sister, in whose house one little cockloft of a room was set specially apart for him, and was full of his property. Here he kept a few boxes of choice cigars for his own private smoking, and a varied assortment of French novels and plays, together with sundry articles of bric-à-

brac which he had picked up during his travels. But, in addition to these articles, the room contained several remarkable mementoes of the Great Revolution, which had come down to Pierre from his grandfather. In one corner hung the veritable pair of shoes worn by Charlotte Corday on the day that she stabbed Marat. In a little glass box on the chimney-piece was a lock of hair shorn from the head of Marie Antoinette after execution. Near it was a handkerchief that had belonged to the Princess de Lamballe. On a bracket opposite the window stood a life-size bust of Marat himself, the hideous head crowned with the bonnet rouge, and inscribed below, *Le Génie de la Révolution*. Near at hand was a working model of the guillotine, made by the redoubtable hands of old Martin Janvard, and close by it a model of one of the tumbrils in which the condemned were conveyed to the Place de la Grève. In this room Pierre and his sister had many pleasant little banquets all to themselves, and many a long chat on matters past, present, and to come. Not having her to

talk to to-night, he was going to write to her, which was the next best thing he could do. So when he had yawned through a couple of chapters of the novel, he took pen and paper, and sat down at Mr. St. George's table, being perfectly aware that he was safe from interruption for another hour at the least. Judging by what Pierre Janvard wrote, there would seem, this evening, to have been a strange similarity in the trains of thought at work in the minds of master and man.

"We are once again back in the old place, chère Margot," wrote the Frenchman. "Was it only yesterday, or is it more than a year ago, since we were in these rooms last? Everything seems as it used to be, except that the old master's voice is heard no longer. He lies cold and quiet in the churchyard. Nothing else seems changed, and yet how changed is all! For a new master now reigns at Park Newton, and that master is not Monsieur Kester St. George. Of course we have known of this all along, but not till we came here did we seem to realize all that it means. One

man, and one man only, stands between my master and all this vast property. That man, as you know already, is his own cousin. He is not married, but he may be before long. If he were only to catch a fever and die—if he were only to commit suicide—if he were only to fall into the river and be drowned—ah, my faith! what luck would then be ours!

“And yet, somehow, little one, I feel as if I should hardly like to change places with this Monsieur Dering. I don’t know why I feel so, but there the feeling is, and I tell you of it. Life is so strangely uncertain, you know; and it seems to me more uncertain still when you stand so terribly in the light of another man. Perhaps you will say that I am superstitious. So be it. But can any man say where superstition begins and where it ends, even in his own mind? I can’t. All I know is this: that if I were Monsieur Dering, the last man in the world whom I would ask to cross my threshold would be Monsieur Kester St. George.”

A fortnight had come and gone since the arrival of Kester St. George and Percy Osmond at Park Newton. Another week would bring their visit to an end, and Lionel Dering was fain to confess to himself that he should not be sorry when that time had arrived. This was more particularly the case as regards Osmond, of whose company he had grown heartily tired. There was, indeed, about Osmond little or nothing that could have any attraction for a man like Lionel Dering. The points of difference between them were too great for any hope to exist that they could ever be bridged over. Friendship between two such men was an impossibility.

With Kester St. George the case was somewhat different. Lionel would gladly have clasped his cousin's hand in friendship, but he had begun to find out that beneath all Kester's geniality, and easy laughing way of dealing with everything that came before him, there existed a nature cold, hard, and cynical, against which the white wings of Friendship or of Love might beat in vain for ever. He

was always pleasant, always smiling, always good-tempered: yet it seemed impossible to get near him, or to feel sure that you knew him better at the end of a year than on the first day you met him. Then, too, Lionel was not without an uneasy sense that not only the servants at the hall, but his own social equals in the neighbourhood, looked upon him in some measure as an interloper, and seemed to think that he must, in some inscrutable way, have defrauded his cousin out of his birthright. No wonder Lionel felt that it would be a relief when the visit should have come to an end.

He took an opportunity one day, when Kester seemed in a more confidential mood than usual, of again hinting at the pleasure it would give him if his cousin would only accept that three thousand a-year out of the estate which it had been his grandfather's manifest wish should be Kester's share of the property. But Kester froze the moment the subject was broached, and Lionel saw plainly how utterly useless any further persistence in it would be.

Both Squire Culpepper and Mr. Cope had called at Park Newton as soon as they heard that Kester St. George was down there on a visit, and a day or two later Lionel invited those gentlemen, together with several other old friends of his cousin, to a dinner at the hall, in honour of the occasion. Three or four return dinners had been given by different people, and now the day was come when they were all to go and dine with the squire at Pincote—Lionel, Kester, and Mr. Percy Osmond.

The afternoon was cold and gloomy, with frequent showers of rain. Luncheon was just over, and Kester St. George, who had been out riding all the morning, was sitting alone before a cozy fire in his dressing-room, keeping the unwelcome company of his own thoughts. In his hands was a cheque, which Osmond, who had just left him, had given him, in settlement of a long-standing debt at cards.

“The greedy hound!” he muttered to himself. “It was like drawing blood from a stone to get even this paltry strip of paper from

him. And yet if this were made out for eight thousand pounds instead of for eight only, it would be honoured. Ay, if it were for six times eight thousand pounds, and there would then be a little fortune left. One thing's very certain. I must raise a couple of thousand somewhere before I'm many hours older, or else I shall have to make a bolt of it—have to put salt water between myself and the hounds that are for ever baying at my heels. If Nantucket had only pulled off the Chester Cup, I should have landed three thousand at the very least. Just like my luck that she should fall lame twelve hours before the race. I *must* have two thousand," he went on as he rose and began to pace the room, "or else submit to be outlawed. Osmond could lend it to me and never feel the loss of it. Shall I ask him? As well try to move a rock. He knows that I'm poor already. If he knew that I was a pauper he'd cut me dead. No great loss as things go; still, I can't afford to lose him. Shall I ask Dering to help me out of my difficulties? No, never! never! Let

ruin—outlawry—suicide itself come, rather than that!”

He sat down again, still twisting and turning the cheque absently between his fingers. “Only a miserable eight pounds! It’s like offering a quarter of a biscuit to a man who is dying of starvation. Mr. Percy Osmond doesn’t seem to have paid much attention to the art of caligraphy when he was young. Upon my word I never saw a signature that it would be easier to imitate. All that a clever fellow wants is a blank cheque on the same bank. With that, what wonders might be wrought! I’ve heard Osmond say that he always sleeps with his keys under his pillow. Once obtain possession of them, the rest would be easy. But how to get them? Suppose he gets drunk to-night at Pincote, as he is nearly sure to do—why then——”

His pale face flushed, and a strange light came into his eyes. He mused for a minute or two, then he got up and rang the bell. Pierre answered it.

"Ascertain at what hour the next train starts for London."

In a couple of minutes Pierre came back. "The train for London passes Duxley station at four thirty-six," he said.

"Good. You will just have time to catch it," said Mr. St. George. "You will reach London in two hours and a quarter after you leave Duxley. Take a cab. Find out Boncher. Tell him to telegraph me first thing to-morrow morning, so that the message will reach me here not later than eight o'clock. His telegram must be to this effect: *You are wanted in town immediately on most important business.* Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"An hour in London will be enough for you. You will be able to catch the eight o'clock down train, and ought to be back in this room by eleven at the latest. In fact, I shall expect to find you here when I return from Pincote."

"Yes, sir."

“And don’t say a word to any one about your journey.”

Pierre bowed and left the room.

“Invaluable fellow, that,” said Kester aloud. The excitement that had stirred his blood so strangely a few minutes before was still upon him. He was like a man who had screwed himself up to some desperate resolve which he was determined to go through with at every cost.

He began slowly and deliberately to dress himself for dinner.

“There’s an old saying, ‘Nothing risk, nothing have,’” he muttered to himself. “The risk, in this case, seems to be nothing very desperate. If I fail, I shall be no worse off than I am now. If I succeed——” His face blanched as suddenly as if he had seen a ghost.

“I forgot that!” he whispered. “Dering sleeps in the next room to Osmond. What if he should be awake? Even when he does sleep, I’ve heard him say that the noise of a strange footstep is enough to rouse him. That


is a difficulty I never thought of—the biggest difficulty of all.”

He was still pondering over this difficulty, whatever it might be, when Osmond burst suddenly into the room.

“Not ready yet?” he said. “What a dilatory fellow you are! We shall have Dering in a devil of a temper if you don’t make haste. I’ll wait for you, if you don’t mind my having a whiff meanwhile.”

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

“ SAY, Dering, it ain't twelve o'clock yet. You'll give me half an hour in the billiard-room before going to roost?”

Percy Osmond was the speaker. He was getting out of the brougham which had brought the three gentlemen back from Pin-cote, where they had been dining. His voice was thick, and his gait unsteady. It was evident that he had been indulging too freely in Squire Culpepper's old port.

“You've surely had enough billiards for one night,” said Lionel, good-humouredly. “I should have thought that the thrashing you

gave young Cope would have satisfied you till to-morrow morning."

"I want to thrash you as I thrashed him."

"You shall thrash me as much as you like in the morning."

"This is what they call country hospitality!" said Osmond, turning to Kester. "Condemned to go to bed at eleven-thirty, like so many virtuous peasants in an opera. No more brandy, no more cigars, no more billiards. Nothing but everlasting bed. How very good we are in the country!"

Kester laughed. "I told you that you would soon grow tired of the rural districts," he said.

"The rural districts themselves are all very nice and proper. I've nothing to say against them," said Mr. Osmond, as he sat down deliberately on the stairs, for they were all in the house by this time. "It's the people who live in them that I complain of. To send your guests to bed at eleven-thirty against their will, and to decline a simple game of billiards with one of them because you're

afraid to acknowledge that he's the better player of the two—can this be your old English hospitality ?”

“My dear Osmond, I will play you a game of billiards with pleasure, if your mind is so set on it,” said Lionel. “I had no idea that you were so entêté in the matter. Come along. I dare say the lamps are still alight.”

“Spoken like a nobleman,” said Osmond, with tipsy gravity. “I accept your apology. Just order up some brandy and seltzer, there's a good fellow. St. George, you'll come and mark for us ?”

“With pleasure,” said Kester. “I'll join you in two minutes.” He left them at the top of the stairs, they going towards the billiard-room. He was anxious to know whether Pierre had got back from London.

Yes, there sat Pierre in the dressing-room, quiet, watchful, and alert as ever. “Everything gone off all right ?” said Mr. St. George.

“Everything has gone off quite right, sir,” said Pierre.

"There will be no hitch as regards the telegram to-morrow morning, eh?"

"None whatever, sir."

"You need not sit up for me."

"Very well, sir."

"And yet—on second thoughts—you had perhaps better do so."

"Yes, sir."

Kester took off his dress-coat, put on an old shooting-jacket and a smoking-cap, and then went off to the billiard-room.

"Monsieur St. George means mischief to-night," said Pierre, smiling to himself, and rubbing his hands slowly. "It is not very often I see that light in his eye. When I do see it, I know it means no good to somebody."

Kester found the two men chalking their cues. A servant was mixing a tumbler of brandy-and-seltzer for Osmond.

"I'll play you one game, a hundred up," said Osmond, as soon as the servant had left the room; "and I'll back my own play for ten pounds."

"You know that I never bet," said Lionel.

"I wouldn't give the snuff of a candle for a fellow who hasn't the pluck to back his own play, or his own opinion," said Osmond, with a sneer.

"I don't mind taking you," said Kester, quickly.

"Done!" said Osmond.

Lionel could not repress a movement of annoyance.

Both he and Osmond were good billiard-players, but he was the better of the two. This however was a point which Osmond, who was proud of his ability with the cue, would never concede. With Lionel billiard-playing was an easy, natural gift; with Osmond it was the result of intense study and application. With the former it seemed the easiest thing in the world to play well—with the latter one of the most difficult. They had played much together during Osmond's visit to Park Newton, but Osmond could never lose with equanimity. He became disagreeable and quarrelsome the moment the game began to go against him, and, rather than have a scene

under his own roof, Lionel would often play carelessly and allow his opponent to win game after game. Such had been his intention in the present case till Kester foolishly accepted Osmond's bet. After that, to have lost the game would have been to lose Kester's money also ; and, foolish as was the bet, Lionel did not feel disposed to let Osmond benefit by it. Besides, to win Osmond's money was to touch him in his only vulnerable point, and it seemed to Lionel that he fully deserved to be made to smart.

The game began and went on with varying success. Osmond had drank far too much wine to play well, and Lionel, in a mood of utter indifference, missed stroke after stroke in a way that made Kester groan inwardly with vexation. Lionel, in truth, was disgusted with himself and disgusted with his opponent. "I'd far sooner follow the plough all my life on Gatehouse Farm, than be condemned to associate very much with men like this one," he said to himself. "And yet the world calls him a gentleman."

"Call the game, St. George," cried Osmond, in his most insolent tone.

"Seventy-five—fifty-two, and your royal highness to play," said Kester.

"None of your sneers," said Osmond. "Seventy-five—fifty-two, eh?—Well, put me on three more—and three more—very carefully. A miss, by Jove! Ought to have had that middle pocket."

"Fifty-two—eighty-one," called St. George.

"How does your ten pounds look now, eh?" asked Osmond, with a chuckle.

"Not very rosy, I must confess," said Kester, with a shrug of his shoulders, and an appealing glance at his cousin.

"I hope you are prepared to pay up if you lose," said Osmond, insolently.

Kester started to his feet, but Lionel laid a hand on his shoulder.

"The game is not lost yet, Mr. Osmond," he said, coldly, but courteously.

"I guess it's in a dying state as far as you're concerned," said Osmond, coughing his little effeminate cough.

Lionel played and made a brilliant break of thirty.

"Eighty-one—eighty-two," called Kester, and there was a triumphant ring in his voice as he did so.

Osmond, white with the rage he could not hide, said nothing. He laid down his cigar, chalked his cue carefully, played, and missed.

"Just like my luck!" he cried, with an oath. "Dering, you might give a fellow something decent to smoke," he added, as he flung his cigar into the grate.

"The cigars are good ones. I smoke them myself," said Lionel, quietly.

"Anyhow, they are not fit to offer to a gentleman."

"I did not offer them to a gentleman. *You* helped yourself."

"Of course I did," he answered, not comprehending the irony of Lionel's remark. "And deuced bad smokes they are."

Lionel played and ran his score up to ninety-eight.

“Two more will make you game,” said Kester.

“Two more would not have made him game if he hadn’t played with my ball instead of his own,” said Osmond, his lips livid with rage.

“I have not played with your ball instead of my own, Mr. Osmond.”

“I repeat that you have. After the second cannon in your last break, you played with the wrong ball. You cannoned again, and then resumed play with your own ball.”

“You are mistaken—indeed you are,” said Lionel, earnestly.

“Oh, of course!” sneered Osmond. “It’s not to be expected that you would say anything else.”

“Did you see the stroke, Kester?” appealed Lionel.

“Certainly I did. You played with your own ball and not with Mr. Osmond’s.”

“Of course, Kester is bound to back up all we say! Our bankrupt relation can’t afford to do otherwise. He has ten pounds on the game, and——”

"By Heaven, Osmond!" burst out Mr. St. George. Lionel again laid his hand on his cousin's shoulder.

"Mr. Osmond is my guest," he said, impressively. "In a moment of temper he has made use of certain expressions which he will be the first to regret to-morrow. Let us look upon the game as a drawn one, and, if need be, discuss it fully over breakfast in the morning."

"You have an uncommonly nice way of slipping out of a difficulty, Dering, I must confess. But it won't wash with me. The moment I find a man's not acting on the square, I brand him before the world as a cheat and a blackleg."

"Your language is very strong, Mr. Osmond."

"Not stronger than the case demands."

"I assure you again, on my word of honour, that you are mistaken in saying that I played with the wrong ball."

"And I assure you, on *my* word of honour, that I am not mistaken."

"Even granting for a moment that, in mistake, I did play the wrong ball, you cannot suppose that I would knowingly attempt to cheat you for the sake of a paltry ten pounds."

"But I can and do suppose it," said Osmond, vehemently. "The fact of your being a rich man has nothing to do with it. I have known a marquis cheat at cards for the sake of half a sovereign. Why shouldn't you try to cheat me out of ten pounds?"

"Your experience of the world, Mr. Osmond, seems to have been a very unfortunate one," said Lionel, coldly.

"Perhaps it has, and perhaps it hasn't," said Osmond, savagely. "Anyhow, it has taught me to be on the look-out for rogues."

"Osmond, are you mad, or drunk, or both?" cried Kester.

"A little of both," said Lionel, sternly. "If he were not under my roof, I would horsewhip him till he went down on his knees and proclaimed himself the liar and bully he really is."

Osmond was in the act of lifting a glass of

brandy-and-seltzer to his lips as Lionel spoke. He waited, without drinking, till Lionel had done. "You called me a liar, did you?" he said. "Then, take that!" and as he spoke, he flung the remaining contents of the glass into Lionel's face, and sent the glass itself crashing to the other side of the room.

Another instant and Dering's terrible fingers were closed round Osmond's throat. This last insult was more than he could bear. His self-control was flung to the winds. Osmond's nerveless frame quivered and shook helplessly in the strong man's grasp. He was as powerless to help himself as any child would have been. His eyes were starting from his head, and his face beginning to turn livid, when Kester started forward.

"Don't choke him, Li," he said. "Don't kill the beggar quite."

"You mean, contemptible hound!" said Dering, as he loosened his grasp and flung Osmond away: who staggered and fell to the ground, gasping for breath, and hardly knowing for the moment what had befallen him.

With a few wild gasps and a tug or two at his cravat, he seemed to partially recover himself. Raising himself on his left elbow, he put his right hand deep down inside his waistcoat, and from some secret pocket there he drew out what looked like a toy pistol, but which was a deadly weapon enough in competent hands. Before either Kester or Lionel knew what he was about, he had taken point-blank aim at the latter, and fired. But drink had made his hand unsteady, and the bullet intended for Lionel's brain passed harmlessly through his hair, and lodged in the panelling behind.

Kester sprang at him, wrenched the pistol from his hand, and flung it to the other end of the room. As he did so, the thought passed through his mind: "If that bullet had only been aimed two inches lower, what a difference it would have made to me!" "Osmond, are you going to turn assassin?" he said. "You must come with me." He helped him up from the ground, took his right arm firmly within his, and led him towards the door.

"That is the way we serve those who insult us out in the West," said Osmond. "Only : for once, I missed my aim. But I'll fight it out with him to-morrow, anyhow he likes."

"To-morrow we will settle our little differences as gentlemen of honour should settle such things," said Kester, soothingly. And with these words he led him from the room.

Lionel sank back on a chair, sick, weary, and disgusted ; and so sat without moving till Kester came back, some ten minutes later.

"What have you done with Osmond?" he said.

"I have given him in charge of my man, who won't leave him till he has seen him safely in bed. He would insist on having more brandy. In ten minutes he will be sleeping the sleep of the drunken."

Lionel rose with a look of pain, and pressed one hand to the side of his head.

"Got one of your bad head aches?" asked Kester.

"Yes : about the worst that I ever remember to have had."

"Is there no cure for them?"

"None but patience."

"But, surely, they may be alleviated?"

"I have tried remedies without end, but to no purpose."

"Will you let me make you up a mixture from a prescription of my own? I have all the materials at hand. If I make it up, will you promise to take it? I don't say that it will cure your headache, but I do believe that it will give you relief."

There was a strangely anxious, almost haggard look on his face as he spoke thus, and yet his eyes were never once bent on Lionel. He had picked up one of the cues, and seemed to be busily examining it. When he had done speaking, he waited for his cousin's answer with parted lips, in a sort of breathless hush.

Lionel laughed a rather dismal laugh.

"Well, if you have any faith in your mixture, I don't mind trying it," he said. "It can't make the pain worse, and there is just a faint chance that it may ease it a bit—or that

I may fancy that it does, which is pretty much the same thing."

The cue dropped from Kester's fingers and rattled on the floor. "What was that?" he said, suddenly, looking round with a shiver. "I could have sworn that somebody touched me on the shoulder."

"There is no one here but ourselves," said Lionel, languidly. The pain was almost more than he could bear up against.

Kester recovered his equanimity after an impatient "Pish" at his folly, and the two men went slowly out of the billiard-room together. Outside the door Kester whispered in his cousin's ear, "I will go and fetch the mixture, and be back again in two minutes." Lionel nodded, and Kester was gone.

"Why need he have whispered to me?" asked Lionel of himself. "There was no one to overhear him. There's something queer about him to-night. A little touch of the blues, perhaps; and yet he never seems to drink very hard."

Lionel went off to his rooms—a bed-room

and sitting-room en suite, next to the rooms occupied by Osmond. He took off his coat and tie, and unbuttoned his waistcoat, and then sat down with his feet on the fender, waiting for Kester.

Lionel Dering had been troubled with occasional headaches of a very distressing kind ever since he could remember any thing, and he had quite made up his mind that he must be so troubled till the end of the chapter. He had no faith in his cousin's proposed remedy, but he would take it simply to oblige Kester.

Kester was not long away. He entered the room presently, carrying a small silver tankard in his hand.

"I can't tell you how sorry I feel for this night's work," said Lionel.

"What have you done that you should feel sorry for?" asked Kester, as he put down the tankard on the table.

"I ought to have left the billiard-room instead of flying at poor little Osmond in the brutal way I did. He was half drunk to-

night, and didn't know what he was about. He would have apologised in the morning, and then everything would have come right."

"Considering the provocation you received I think that you acted throughout with the greatest forbearance. Osmond, to say the least of it, is not worthy of any serious consideration."

"But you will see him in the morning, won't you, and act as peacemaker between us, if it be possible to do so?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"I do wish it. The brawl was an utterly disreputable piece of business. I ought not to have let my temper overmaster me. I ought, under no circumstances, to have forgotten that Percy Osmond was my guest."

"Well, never mind all that now. We can discuss the affair fully in the morning. See, I have brought you the mixture I spoke of for your head. I think you will find that it will do you good."

He held out the tankard as he spoke. His pale face looked paler than ever to-night—his

black moustache blacker than ever ; but his restless eyes seemed to fix themselves anywhere rather than on his cousin's face. Lionel took the tankard from Kester's hand, and drank off the contents at a draught. Then he wiped his lips with his pocket handkerchief, and having no coat on, he stuffed the handkerchief carelessly under his braces for the time being.

"And now I'll leave you to sweet slumber and happy dreams," said Kester, as he took back the empty tankard. "Your head will be better by morning, I do not doubt. Good night."

"Good night," responded Lionel, languidly, from his chair by the fire.

Kester went softly out, and closed the door lightly behind him.

Ten minutes passed away, and then Lionel awoke with a start to find that he had unconsciously fallen into a doze over the fire. The pain in his head certainly seemed a little better already. But when he rose to his feet, he found that he could hardly stand. His limbs

seemed too weak to support him, and he was overcome with a dull heavy drowsiness such as he had never felt before. The room and everything in it began to rock slowly up and down like the cabin of a ship at sea. There were only two candles on the table, but Lionel seemed to see a dozen. Sleep—sleep of the deepest—seemed to be numbing both his heart and his brain. Consciousness was fast leaving him. He staggered rather than walked to the couch on the opposite side of the room. He reached it. He had just sense enough left to fling himself on it, and then he remembered nothing more.

He remembered nothing more till he awoke next morning. It was broad daylight when he opened his eyes. He had to gather his wits together and to think for a minute or two before he could call to mind how and why it was that he found himself lying there, on his dressing-room couch, instead of in his bed as usual. Then all the events of the evening flashed across his mind in a moment: the quarrel in the billiard-room; the pistol-

shot; the pain in his head; the draught given him by his cousin, and the strange effect it had upon him. "It must have been a very powerful narcotic," said Lionel to himself. "But, at all events, it has cured my headache."

By turning his head he could see the time-piece on the bureau. It was nine o'clock, an hour and a half past his usual time for rising. But, late as it was, he felt a strange disinclination for getting up. He felt as if he could lie there all day without moving. His mind was perfectly clear; the pain had left his head; but his limbs seemed heavy, useless, inert. He would stay there for just ten minutes longer, he said to himself, and then he would positively get up. Kester would be waiting breakfast for him, and he was anxious to know how Osmond was this morning, and what recollection he retained of the fracas overnight.

But Osmond was up already. He could hear him moving about the next room. So far all was well. But what would be the

result of their quarrel? Osmond must leave Park Newton, and at once. No other course was—— Now that he listened more particularly, he could hear the footsteps of more than one person in the next room—of more than two—of several. And there were footsteps in the corridor, passing to and fro as if in a hurry. There was a whispering, too, as if close outside his door; then the hurried muttering of many voices in Osmond's room; then the clash of two doors far away in the opposite wing of the house.

What could it all mean? Was Osmond ill? Or was he simply having his luggage packed, with the view of leaving for London by the forenoon train? Lionel sprang to his feet without another moment's delay. The sudden change of position made him dizzy. He pressed his fingers over both his eyes for a moment or two while he recovered himself. Again there was a noise of whispering in the corridor outside. Lionel made a step or two forward towards the door, and then came to a dead stop—horror-stricken by something

which he now saw for the first time. The pocket-handkerchief which he had stuffed carelessly under his braces overnight had fallen to the ground when he sprang from the couch. As he stooped to pick it up, he saw that it was stained with blood. But whose blood? It could not be his own—there was nothing the matter with him. But if not his, whose?

Now that he looked at himself more closely, there were crimson streaks on the front of his shirt where the handkerchief had rested against it—and on his wristbands there were other streaks of the same ominous colour.

He had picked up the handkerchief, and was gazing at it in a sort of maze of dread and perplexity, when there came a sudden imperative knocking at his dressing-room door. Next moment the door was opened, and, lifting up his bewildered eyes, Lionel saw clustered in the doorway the frightened faces of five or six of his own servants.

“What is the matter?” he asked, and his

voice sounded strangely unfamiliar both to himself and others.

“ Oh, if you please, sir—Mr. Osmond—the gentleman in the next room !” gasped Pearce the butler.

“ What is the matter with Mr. Osmond ?”

“ He has been murdered in the dead of night !”

Lionel caught at the edge of a table for support. His brain reeled—all the pulses of his being seemed to stand still in awful dread.

“ Murdered ! Percy Osmond murdered !” He breathed the words rather than spoke them aloud. Then for the first time he saw that all those frightened eyes clustered in the doorway were fixed, not on him, but on the terrible token which he was still holding in his hand. He dropped it with a shudder, and strode forward towards the door. They all shrank back as though he were stricken with the plague.

“ Great Heaven ! they cannot suspect that I have done the deed !” he whispered to him-

self. "We must see to this at once," he said aloud.

No one spoke. There was a dead, ominous silence. The crimson stains on his shirt were visible, and every eye was now fixed on them. Lionel paused for a moment at the threshold to gather nerve.

As he stood thus, Pierre Janvard came quickly out of Osmond's room, carrying some small article between the thumb and finger of his right hand. His face was paler than usual, and his half-closed eyes had a sort of feline expression in them which was not pleasant to look upon.

"If you please, sir, is this your property?" he said, addressing himself to Lionel, and displaying a small jet stud set in filigree gold.


Lionel's fingers went up instinctively to his shirt front in search of the missing stud.

"Yes, that is my property," he said. "Where did you find it?"

"I found it just now, sir, clutched in the hand of Mr. Percy Osmond, who lies murdered in the next room."

CHAPTER XII.

TOM BRISTOW'S RETURN.

“HAT can be sweeter or more charming than an English May-day? I declare I've seen nothing in the East at all comparable to it.”

The speaker was Tom Bristow; the person addressed was a casual *compagnon de voyage*, whose acquaintance he had made during the Channel passage; and the scene was a first-class compartment in the mail train from Dover to London.

“You wouldn't be so ready to praise an English May-day if you had been here last week, as I was,” was the reply. “No sunshine—not a gleam; but, in place of it, a confounded east wind that was almost keen

enough to shave you. Every second fellow you met spoke to you through his nose ; and when you did happen to get near a fire, you were frozen through on one side before you were half warmed through on the other."

"Well, it's pleasant enough now, in all conscience," said Tom, with a smile of easy content.

Tom Bristow, who was very thorough in most of his undertakings, had remained abroad—extending his travels into Palestine and Egypt—till his health was completely re-established. But, as he said to himself, he had now had enough of sands and sunsets ; of dirty Algerines and still dirtier Arabs ; of camel-riding and mule-riding ; of beggars and buck-sheesh ; and he was now coming back, with renewed zest, to the prosaic duties of everyday existence, as exemplified, in his case, in the rise and fall of public securities and the refined gambling of the London Stock Exchange.

By the time he had been a week in London he had made himself thoroughly master of the

situation again, and almost felt as if he had never been away. "I have been so long used to an idle life," he said to himself, about a fortnight after his return, "that very little work seems to knock me up. Why not take the five o'clock train this afternoon, and run down as far as Gatehouse Farm, and spend a couple of days with old Li Dering? Where in the wide world is there any air equal to that which blows across the sandhills of the old farm?"

Between nine and ten o'clock on Sunday morning Tom Bristow knocked at the well-remembered door. After sleeping at the Station Hotel, he had walked leisurely across the fields, his heart beating high with the expectation of shortly being able to grasp his friend by the hand. Everything seemed as if he had left the farm but yesterday, except that then it was autumn and now it was spring. Mrs. Bevis answered his knock. She started at the sight of him, and could not repress an exclamation of surprise. "Yes, here I am once more," said Tom, with his

pleasant smile. "Don't tell me that Mr. Dering is not at home."

Mrs. Bevis's answer was a sudden burst of tears.

"What has happened, Mrs. Bevis?" cried Tom, in alarm. "Not—not—?" His looks finished the question.

"Oh, Mr. Bristow, haven't you heard, sir?" cried Mrs. Bevis through her sobs.

"I've heard nothing—not a word. I have only just returned from abroad."

"Mr. Dering, sir, is lying in Duxley gaol, waiting to take his trial at the next assizes."

"His trial!" echoed Tom in amazed perplexity. "Trial for what?"

"For wilful murder, sir!"

"Can this be true?" cried Tom, as he sank back, with blanched face and staring eyes, on the old oaken seat in the porch.

"Only too true, sir—only too true!" moaned Mrs. Bevis. "But I'll never believe that he did it—never!" she added emphatically. "A kinder heart, a truer gentleman, never drew breath."

"I'll say amen to that," replied Tom, earnestly. "But Lionel Dering committed for wilful murder! It seems an utter impossibility."

"Why, all England's been ringing with the story," added Mrs. Bevis.

"And yet I've never heard of it. But, as I said before, I've only just got back from the East, where I was two months without seeing a newspaper.

"I couldn't bear to tell you about it, sir. My heart seems almost broken as it is. But I've got the newspapers here with all the account in. Perhaps you would like to read them for yourself, sir."

"I should indeed, Mrs. Bevis. But did I understand you aright when you said that Mr. Dering was in Duxley gaol?"

"That's the place, sir."

"Duxley in Midlandshire?"

"The very same, sir."

"But what was Mr. Dering doing so far away from home?"

"Law, sir! I'd forgotten that you were a

stranger to the news. Master's a rich man now, sir. His uncle died last autumn, and left him a great estate close by Duxley. He's been living there ever since."

"You astonish me, Mrs. Bevis. But what is the name of the estate?"

"Park Newton. But may I ask whether you know Duxley, sir?"

"I know Duxley very well indeed. I was born and brought up there."

"To think of that, now!"

"Then the name of Mr. Dering's uncle must have been Mr. Arthur St. George?"

"That's the name, sir. I recollect it quite well, because it put me in mind of St. George and the Dragon. But I'll fetch you the newspapers."

She brought the papers presently, and left Tom to himself while he read them. The case was as Mrs. Bevis had stated it. Lionel Dering stood committed to take his trial at the next assizes for the wilful murder of Percy Osmond.

Mrs. Bevis, coming back after a quarter of

an hour, found Mr. Bristow buried deep in thought, with the newspapers lying unheeded by his side.

"You don't believe that he did it, do you, sir?" she asked, with tearful earnestness.

"I would stake my existence on Mr. Dering's innocence!" said Tom, emphatically.

"God bless you, sir, for those words!" cried Mrs. Bevis. "There must surely be some way to help him—some way of proving that he did not do this dreadful thing?"

"Whatever friendship or money can do shall be done for him. That you may rely upon."

"Mr. Dering saved your life, sir. You will try and save his, won't you?"

"I will—so help me Heaven!" answered Tom, fervently.

"It is strange," mused Tom, as he walked sadly back to the station, "that in all our long conversations together Dering should never have mentioned that he had an uncle living within three miles of Duxley, and I should never have spoken of the town by

name as the place where I was born and reared. And then to think that Tobias Hoskyns, my old governor, should be the man of all men into whose hands Dering has entrusted his case ! But the whole affair is a tissue of surprises from beginning to end."

Next morning, at nine o'clock, Mr. Tom Bristow, after a preliminary knock, walked into the private office of Mr. Tobias Hoskyns, of Duxley, attorney-at-law.

Mr. Hoskyns was a frail-looking, spare-built man of some fifty-five or sixty years. He was rather short-sighted, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles. He had gray hair, and gray whiskers that ended abruptly half-way down his cheeks, as though too timid to venture farther. He was dressed with a certain old-fashioned precision, that took little or no heed of the variations of fashion, but went on quietly repeating itself from one year's end to another. He was very fond of snuff, which he imbibed, not after the reckless and defiant manner affected by some lovers of the powdered weed, but in a deferential, half-apolo-

getic kind of way, as though he were ashamed of the practice, and begged you would make a point of forgetting his weakness as speedily as possible. He carried an old-fashioned silver snuff-box in his waistcoat pocket, and in another pocket a yellow silk handkerchief of immense size, bordered with black. In short, Mr. Hoskyns was a clearly individualized figure, and one might safely say that, by sight at least, he was known to every man, woman, and child in Duxley.

He was very pleased indeed to see his quondam clerk. "Then you do still manage to keep your head above water, eh?" he said, as he shook Tom warmly by the hand.

"Yes. The waters of speculation have not quite swallowed me up," said Tom, demurely.

"Ah, you know the old proverb, 'a rolling stone,' et cetera. You should have stuck to your stool in the outer office, as I advised you to do. You might, perhaps, have been junior partner by this time, and—this in your ear—the business gets more lucrative every year; it does really. Ah, Tom, Tom, you

made a great mistake when you left Duxley ! Thought you were going to set the Thames on fire, I know you did."

"Experience, sir, is said to make fools wise. Let us hope that I shall have gathered a little of the commodity by-and-by."

"Well, you must come and dine with me this evening. Can't stay now. I'm due at the gaol in fifteen minutes."

"That's the very place to which I want to go with you."

"Eh ? Bless my heart, what do you want to go there for ?"

"To see the same man that you are going to visit—to see my dear friend, Lionel Dering."

"Why, good gracious, you don't mean to say ——" and Mr. Hoskyns took off his spectacles, and stared at Tom in blank amazement.

Then Tom had to explain, in the fewest possible words, how it happened that he and Lionel Dering were such excellent friends. Five minutes later they were on their way to the gaol.

As they passed through the lawyer's outer office, Tom glanced round. With one exception, the faces of all there were strangers to him. The exception was not a very inviting person to look at, but Tom went up and shook hands with him. He was a tall, big-boned, loosely-built man of five and forty, dressed in very rusty black—an awkward, shambling sort of fellow, unshaven and uncombed, with grubby hands and bleared eyes, and with a wild shaggy mop of hair which had once been jet black, but was now thickly sprinkled with gray. The man's features were wanting neither in power nor intellect, but they were marred by an air of habitual dissipation—of sottishness, even—which he made no effort to conceal.

“Jabez Crede is still with you, I see,” said Tom, as he and the lawyer walked down the street.

“Yes, I still keep him on,” answered Hoskyns, “though, if I have threatened once to turn him away, I have a hundred times. With his dirty, drunken ways, the man, as a

man, is unbearable to me ; but, as a clerk, I don't know what I should do without him. For engrossing, or copying, he is useless, his hand is far too shaky. But in one other respect he is invaluable to me : his memory is like a prodigious storehouse, in which he can lay his hand on any particular article at a moment's notice. He knows how useful he is to me, and he presumes on that knowledge to do things that I would submit to from no other clerk in my employ."

There was no difficulty in passing Tom into the gaol. In the case of a prisoner of such distinction as Mr. Dering, some of the more stringent of the prison regulations were to a certain extent relaxed. Besides which, Mr. Hoskyns and the governor were bosom friends, playing whist together two or three evenings a week the winter through, and wrangling over the odd trick, as only old companions can wrangle ; so that the lawyer's word soon placed Tom inside the magic gates, and after he had been introduced to Mr. Dux, the aforesaid governor, he might be said to be

duly possessed of the Open Sesame of the grim old building.

"This is kind of you, Bristow, very kind!" exclaimed Lionel, as he strode forward to greet his friend. "When we parted last we little thought that our next meeting would be in these halls of dazzling light." He laughed a dismal laugh, and pressed Tom down into his own chair.

For a moment or two Tom could not trust himself to speak. "There's a silver lining to every cloud, you know, old boy," he stammered out at last. "You must bear up like a brick. Please Heaven, we'll soon have you out of this hole, and everything will come right in the long run, never fear." He felt that it was not at all what he had intended to say, but, somehow, his usual ready flow of words seemed dried up for a little while.

Lionel Dering had been nearly a month in prison. Confinement to a man of his active outdoor habits was especially irksome, and Tom was not surprised to find him looking pale and more careworn than he had ever seen him

look before. He was extraordinarily cheerful, however; and when Tom told him that it was his intention to stay at Duxley till the trial was over, he brightened up still more, and at once proposed that they two should have a game at chess, there and then, as in the old pleasant days at Gatehouse Farm.

"Dux is very good to me," he explained. "He comes to see me for an hour most evenings. He and I have had several games together. The turnkey will fetch his board and men in five minutes."

Mr. Hoskyns was somewhat scandalized. "I cannot get my client," he explained to Tom, "to evince that interest in his trial, and the arrangements for his defence, that the importance of the occasion demands. It really almost seems as if Mr. Dering looked upon the whole business as referring, not to himself, but to some stranger in whose affairs he took only the faintest possible interest."

"My dear Hoskyns," said Lionel, "you pumped me dry long ago of every morsel of information that I could give you respecting

this wretched business. You can get nothing more out of me, and may as well leave me in peace. Employ whom you will to defend me, if defence I need. That is your business, not mine."

So Tom and Lionel had their game of chess, and a long talk together afterwards, and when Tom at last left the prison, it was with a promise to be there again at an early hour next morning.

Lionel Dering's first care after his arrest was to write to Edith West, in order that she might learn the news direct from himself, and not through a newspaper or any other source.

"My darling Edith," he wrote, "a terrible misfortune has befallen me. . A gentleman, Mr. Percy Osmond by name, one of my guests at Park Newton, has been foully murdered, and I am accused of the crime. That my innocence will be made clear to the world at my trial, I do not doubt. Till that day comes I must submit, with what patience I may, to be kept closely under lock and key in this

grim building from which I write. You see that I write quite calmly, and without any fear whatever as to the result. My greatest trouble in the matter is my enforced deprivation of your dear society for a little while. I will write you fuller particulars to-morrow. I am afraid that it will be necessary to fix the date of our marriage a month later than the time agreed upon, but certainly not more than a month. That of itself is very annoying. I beg that you will not fret or worry yourself on my account. This is but a little trial which will soon be over, and which, years hence, will shape itself into a seasonable story to be told round the Christmas fire."

Lionel saw from the moment of his arrest that the evidence against him was far too strong to allow him to hope for any other issue than a commitment for trial at the assizes. And he was right. The magistrates before whom he was taken could not do otherwise than commit him for wilful murder. The jet stud found in the dead man's hand, the saturated handkerchief, the streaks of

blood on his shirt—damning proofs all, which Lionel Dering could neither explain nor extenuate—left them no other alternative.

And that, to the public at large, seemed the strangest feature of the case : Mr. Dering either could not or would not offer any explanation. If it seemed strange to the outside world that no explanation was forthcoming, how much stranger did it seem to Lionel himself, that he was utterly unable to offer any ! How and by what means had those terrible evidences of guilt come there ? Day and night, night and day, during his first week in prison, he kept on asking himself the same question, only to acknowledge himself utterly baffled, and as far from any satisfactory answer the last time he asked it as he was the first. All that he could say was, that he knew absolutely nothing ; that his mind was an utter blank from the moment he flung himself, half stupefied, on his dressing-room sofa till the moment he woke next morning and found his handkerchief saturated with blood. Heartsick and brain-weary, he

at length gave up all effort to solve a problem which, as far as he was concerned, seemed incapable of any solution ; and set himself to face the inevitable with what patience and resignation he could summon to his aid. He could only trust and hope that on the day of the trial, something would turn up, some proof be forthcoming, which would exculpate him utterly, and prove once more the fallibility of even the strongest chain of circumstantial evidence. If not—but the alternative was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

As already stated, Lionel's first act after his arrest was to write a note to Edith West. Twelve hours later, Mrs. Garside and Miss West stepped out of the train at Duxley station. The newspapers had told them that Mr. Dering's case was in the hands of a certain Mr. Hoskyns, and the first person they accosted after leaving the station, directed them to that gentleman's office. Fortunately, Mr. Hoskyns was at home. They told him who they were, and that their object in

coming to Duxley was to see and be near Mr. Dering.

“I shall see Mr. Dering this evening,” said the lawyer. “I will tell him that you are in Duxley, and should he prove willing to see you—which I do not doubt that he will—you can accompany me to the prison at ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

Lionel was overjoyed to learn that Edith was so near him, and could not find in his heart to blame her for coming, however injudicious such a step might have seemed to many people. But even he, as yet, had conceived but a very vague idea of the infinite capabilities of a character such as hers.

On the morrow they met, and it was a meeting that made even Hoskyns, case-hardened though he was, remember for a moment that, many, many years ago, he himself had been young.

The moment the door was opened Edith sprang to Lionel’s arms, utterly indifferent to the fact that Mrs. Garside and the lawyer were looking on from the background. “My

life ! my love ! my husband !” she murmured, between her tears. “ At last, at last !—my own, never to be lost to me again. And this is your home—this miserable cell ! It shall be my home too. If they will not let me stay with you, my heart, at least, will be with you day and night—always.”

“ Now I feel that you love me,” was all that Lionel could say for the moment.

“ I cling to you because you are in trouble,” said Edith. “ My place is by your side. I have a right to be here, and nothing shall keep me away. To-morrow, or next day at the latest, Lionel, you must make me your wife.”

“ What, marry you here, Edith ! In this place, and while I am a prisoner charged with wilful murder !”

“ Yes ; in this place, and while you are a prisoner charged with wilful murder.”

“ My darling child, what are you thinking of ?” in mild protest from Mrs. Garside.

“ Aunt, I know perfectly well what I am thinking of. I have been Lionel’s promised

wife for some time. I am now going to be his wife in reality. I am only a weak woman, I know ; I cannot really help him ; I can only love him and watch over him, and do my best to lighten the dark hours of his life in prison."

"But suppose the worst comes to the worst," said Lionel, very gravely, "and such a result is by no means improbable."

Edith shuddered. "You only supply me with one argument the more," she answered. "The deeper your trouble—the greater your peril—the closer must I cling to you. It is hard to see you here—hard to know of what you are accused—but you will break my heart altogether, Lionel, if you drive me from your side."

Gently and gravely Lionel argued with her, but to no purpose. It is possible that his arguments were not very powerful ones ; that they were not very logically enforced. Who could have resisted her loving, passionate plea ? Not Lionel, whose heart, despite his outward show of resistance, went out


half-way to meet hers, as Edith's own instinct too surely told her.

Three days later they were married in the prison chapel. Mr. Hoskyns made a special journey to London and brought back the licence. One stipulation was made by Lionel—that the marriage should be kept a profound secret, and a profound secret it was kept. The witnesses were Mrs. Garside, Hoskyns, Mr. Dux, and the chief warder. Beyond these four, and the chaplain, the knowledge did not extend. Even the turnkeys, whose duty it was to attend to Lionel, had no suspicion of what had taken place.

Three weeks had come and gone since the marriage of Lionel and Edith when Tom Bristow first set foot inside the gaol.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DINNER AT PINCOTE.

IONEL DERING was blessed with one of those equable dispositions which predispose their owner to look always at the sunny side of everything ; and even now, in prison, and with such a terrible accusation hanging over him, no one ever saw him downhearted or in any way distressed. There was about him a serenity, a quiet cheerfulness, which nothing seemed able to disturb ; and when in the company of others he was usually as gay and animated as if the four walls of his cell had been those of his own study at Park Newton. The ordeal was, in any case, a very trying one ; but it would have been infinitely more so but for the sweet

offices of love and friendship which he owed in one case to his wife, and in the other to his friend. Either Edith or Tom saw him every day. But when all his visitors had gone, and night and silence had settled down on the grim old prison—silence so profound that but for the recurring voice of a distant clock, as it counted the hours slowly and solemnly, he could have fancied himself the last man left alive in the world—then it was that he felt his situation the most. He had been so used to an active, outdoor life, that he could not now tire himself sufficiently to sleep well.

It was these hours of darkness, when the rest of the world was abed, and the long, long hours of daylight in the early summer mornings before it was yet awake, which tried him more than anything else. At such times, when he was tired of reading—and he had never before read so much in so short a space of time—he could do nothing but lie back on his pallet, with his arms curled under his head, and think. The mornings were balmy, soft, and bright. Through the cell-casement,

which he could open at will, he could hear the merry twittering of innumerable sparrows. He could see the slow shadows sliding, inch by inch, down the gray stone walls of the prison yard, as the sun rose higher in the sky. Now and then the sweet west wind brought him faint wafts of fragrance from the hay-slopes just outside the prison gates. Sometimes he could hear the barking of a dog on some far far-off farm, or the dull lowing of cattle ; sounds which reminded him that the great world, with its life, and hopes, and fears, lay close around him, though he himself might have no part therein. At such moments he often felt that he would give half of all he was possessed of for an hour's freedom outside those tomb-like walls—for one hour's blessed freedom, with Edith by his side, to wander at their own sweet will through lane and coppice and by river's brim, with the free air of heaven blowing around them, and nothing to bound their eyes but the dim horizon, lying like a purple ring on woods and meadows far away.

Little wonder that during these long, solitary hours a sense of depression, of melancholy even, would now and then take possession of him for a little while; that his mind was oppressed with vague forebodings of what that future, which was now drawing near with sure but unhasting footsteps, might possibly have in store for him. He had just won for himself the sweetest prize which this world had in its power to offer him, and his very soul shrank within him when he thought that he had won it only, perhaps, to lose it for ever in a few short weeks. Bitter, very bitter—despairing almost—grew his thoughts at such times; but he struggled bravely against them, and never let them master him for long. When the clock struck six, and the tramp of heavy feet was heard along the corridors, and the jingling of huge keys—when the warders were changed, and the little wicket in his cell door was opened and a cheerful voice said, “Good-morning, sir. Hope you have slept well,” Lionel’s cheery response would ring out, clear and full, “Good-morning, Jeavons. I’ve had

an excellent night, thank you." And Jeavons would go back to his mates and say, "Mr. Dering's just wonderful. Always the same. Never out o' sorts."

Later on would come Hoskyns, and Edith, and Tom. It was impossible for Edith to visit the prison alone, and the lawyer would often make a pretence of having business with his client when he had none in reality, rather than withstand the piteous, pleading look which would spring to Edith's eyes the moment he told her that there would be no occasion for him to visit the gaol that day. While he lives Hoskyns will never forget those pretty pictures of the lover-husband and his bride, as they sat together, hand in hand, in the grim old cell, comforting each other, strengthening each other, and drawing pictures of the happy future in store for them; deceiving each other with a make-believe gaiety; and hiding, with desperate earnestness, the terrible dread which lay lurking, like a foul witch in a cavern, low down in the heart of each—that, for them, the coming

months might bring, not sunshine, flowers, and the joys of mutual love, but life-long separation and the unspeakable darkness that broods beneath the awful wings of Death.

On these occasions, Hoskyns never neglected to provide himself with a newspaper, and, buried behind the huge broadsheet of "The Times," with spectacles poised on nose, he would go calmly on with his reading, leaving Lionel and Edith almost as much to themselves as though he had not been there. The sterling qualities of the old lawyer, and the thorough sincerity of his character, gradually forced themselves on the notice of Lionel and his wife, both of whom came, after a time, to regard him almost in the light of a second father, and to treat him with an affectionate familiarity which he was not slow to appreciate.

As Tom Bristow was turning the corner of Duxley High Street, one afternoon about three days after his arrival from London, he was met, face to face, by Squire Culpepper.

The squire stopped and stared at Tom, but failed for the moment to recognize him.

“Good-morning, sir,” said Tom, heartily. “Glad to see you looking so well.”

“Why—eh?—surely I must know that face,” said the squire. “It’s young Tom Bristow, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You are not mistaken, sir,” answered Tom.

“Then I’m very glad to see you, Tom—very,” said the squire, as he shook Tom warmly by the hand. “Your father was a man whom I liked and respected immensely. I can never forget his kindness and attention to my poor dear wife during her last illness—never. He did all that man could do to preserve her to me—but it was not to be. For your father’s sake, Tom, you will always find Titus Culpepper stand your friend.”

“It is very kind of you to say so, sir.”

“Not at all—not at all. So you’re back again at the old place, eh? Going to stop with us this time, I hope. You ought never to have left us, young sir, but have settled

down quietly in your father's shoes. Vagabondizing's a bad thing for any young man."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Tom, in a tone of assumed simplicity.

"Glad you've come round to my way of thinking at last. Knew you would. Well, if I can do anything for you in the way of helping you to get a decent living, you may command me fully. Think over what I've said, and come and dine with me at Pincote to-morrow at seven sharp."

"It would be worth something," said Tom to himself as he went on his way, "to know what the squire's opinion about me really is; to have a glimpse at the portrait of me in all its details which he has evolved from his own inner consciousness. Strange that in a little town like this, where everybody knows everybody else's business better than he knows his own, if a man venture to step out of the beaten track prescribed for him by custom and tradition, and is bold enough to strike out a path for himself, he is at once set down as being, of necessity, either

a lunatic or a scapegrace—unless, indeed, his lunacy chance to win for him either a fortune or a name. And then how changed the tone !”

Next evening Tom found himself at Pincote. The squire introduced him in brief terms to his daughter, and then left the room for a few minutes, for which Tom did not thank him. “What can I say to Miss Culpepper that will be likely to interest her ?” he asked himself. “Does she go in for private theatricals, or for ritualism and pet parsons ? Does she believe in soup kitchens and visiting the poor, or would she rather talk about the new prima donna, and the last new poem ?”

Miss Culpepper had sat down again at the piano, and was striking a few chords now and then, in an absent-minded way. She was by no means a pretty girl in the ordinary acceptance of the term. Her face was a good one, without being strikingly handsome. She had something of her father’s shrewd, keen look, but with an underlying expression of

goodness and kindliness, difficult to define, but unmistakably there. . She had large blue-gray eyes and magnificent teeth. Her complexion, lily-clear during the winter months, was already freckled by the warm May sunshine, and would be more so before the summer was over. Finally, her hair was red—not auburn, but an unmistakable red.

But Tom Bristow had rather a weakness for red hair—not perhaps for the deep, dull, fiery red which we sometimes see. He accepted it, as the old Venetians accepted it—as one of the rarest types of beauty, as something far superior to your commonplace browns and blacks. And then he did not object to freckles—in moderation. He looked upon them as one of the signs of a sound country-bred constitution. As Jane Culpepper sat there by the piano, in the sunny May eventide, in her white dress, trimmed with pale green velvet, with her red hair coiled in great bands round her little head—with her frank smile, and her clear honest-looking eyes, she filled up in Tom's

mind his ideal picture of a healthy, pure-minded English country girl, and it struck him that he could have made a very pleasant water-colour sketch of herself and her surroundings.

Jane spared him the trouble of finding a topic that would be likely to interest her by being the first to speak. "Do you find Duxley much changed since you were here last?" she asked.

"Very little changed indeed. These small country towns never do change, or only by such imperceptible degrees that one never notices the difference. But may I ask, Miss Culpepper, how you know that I am not a stranger to Duxley?"

"Oh, I have often heard papa speak of you, and wonder what had become of you."

"And heard him blame me, I doubt not, for running away from the friends of my youth, and the town of my birth."

"I cannot say that you are altogether wrong," answered Jane with a smile. "Papa is a little impulsive at times, as I dare say

you know, and judges every one from his own peculiar standpoint."

"Which means, in my case, I suppose, that because I was born in Duxley, I ought to have earned my bread there, died there, and been buried there."

"Something of the kind, doubtless. Old-fashioned prejudices you would call them, Mr. Bristow."

"I dare say I should. But they are worthy of respect for all that."

"Is not that somewhat of a paradox?"

"Hardly so, I think. Men like Mr. Culpepper, with their conservatism, and their traditions of a past—which, it should not be forgotten, was not a past, but a present, when they were young people, and is, consequently, not so very antiquated—with their faith in old institutions, old modes of thought, old friendships, and—and old wine, are simply invaluable in this shifty, restless, out-of-breath era in which we live. They are like the roots of grass and tangle which bind together the sandhills on a windy shore. They conserve

for us the essence of an experience which dates from years before we were born ; which will sweeten our lives, if we know how to use it : as yonder pot-pourri of faded rose-leaves sweetens this room, and whispers to us that, in summers long ago, flowers as sweet bloomed and faded, as those which blossom for us to-day and will fade and leave us to-morrow."

"When you are as old as papa, Mr. Bristow," said Jane, with a laugh, "I believe you will be just as conservative and full of prejudices as he is."

"I hope so, I'm sure," said Tom, earnestly. "Only, my prejudices will differ in some degree from his—as his would doubtless differ in degree from those of his father—because I happen to have been born some thirty years later in the world's history."

At this moment the servant ushered in Mr. Cope the banker, and Mr. Edward Cope the banker's son. Jane rose, and introduced Tom to them as "Mr. Bristow, a friend of papa's." The banker's son stared at Tom for a moment, nodded his bull head, and then drawing a

chair up to the piano, proceeded to take possession of Jane with an air of proprietorship which brought the colour for a moment into that young lady's face.

The banker himself was more affable, in the pompous way that was habitual with him. He never remembered to have heard the name of Bristow before, but being a friend of the squire, the young man was probably worth cultivating, and, in any case, there was nothing lost by a little politeness. So Mr. Cope cleared his throat, and planting himself like a colossus before the vacant grate, entered with becoming seriousness upon the state of the weather and the prospects of the crops. When the squire came in, five minutes later, Tom and the banker were chatting together, as if they had known each other for years.

They all went in to dinner. Over the soup, said the squire to Mr. Cope: "You were telling me, the other day, that one of your fellows at the bank died a week or two ago?"

“Yes: young Musgrave. Clever young man. Great loss to the firm.”

“Well, if you have not filled up the place it might, perhaps, suit our young friend here,” indicating Tom, “if you like to take him on my recommendation. I don’t know whether Jenny introduced him properly, but he’s the son of Dr. Bristow, who attended my wife in her last illness. I respected his father, and I like the lad, and would gladly do something for him.”

The banker was scandalized. It might almost be said that he was horrified. To think that he had been invited to meet, and, worse than that, had talked on terms of perfect equality with, a young man who was in want of an ordinary clerkship—who would, doubtless, be glad of a stool in the back office of his bank! It was monstrous—it was disgusting! But it was just the sort of inconsiderate conduct that might be expected from a man like Culpepper. His manner towards Tom froze in a moment.

“What say you? Can you do anything for him?” urged the squire.

“Why—ah—really, you know—should be most happy to oblige you, or to serve Mr.—Mr.——”

“Bristow,” said the squire.

“Bristow—thank you—but you see—ah—young Musgrave’s berth was filled up a week ago, and I’m sorry that I’ve nothing else just now at all likely to suit the requirements of your—ah—protégé. I’ll take another spoonful of clear soup, if you please.”

Tom’s face was a study all this time. “I’m in for it now,” he said to himself. “The banker will never speak to me again.”

“Ah, well,” said the squire, “I’ll see McKenna, the electioneering agent, to-morrow. I dare say he’ll know of something that will suit our young friend.”

“Pardon me, Mr. Culpepper,” said Tom quietly, “but I’m afraid there’s a slight mistake somewhere. I am not aware that I ever expressed myself as being in want of a situation, either in Mr. Cope’s bank, or elsewhere.

My business, such as it is, lies in London. I have only come down to Duxley to see a few old friends."

"Why, bless my heart," said the squire, "I thought you told me yesterday that you were in want of something to do!"

"A misunderstanding, I assure you, sir. Many thanks to you all the same."

"And what the deuce *is* your business, if I may make bold to ask?" said the squire, testily.

Tom hesitated for a moment. "I believe, sir, I might describe myself as an individual who lives by his wits—such as they are," he said at last.

"And can you manage to make money by your wits?" asked the squire, with ill-concealed contempt.

"A little, sir," answered Tom. "Enough to find me in food and clothes. Enough to satisfy my few and simple needs."

The squire gave a grunt of discontent, and turned towards the banker, who, ignoring any further notice of Tom, at once broached the

interminable subject of local politics—a subject that had a fascination for the squire which he was never able to resist. Tom revenged himself by turning his attention to the opposite end of the table, where sat Miss Culpepper, with her faithful squire, Mr. Edward Cope, in close proximity to her. “They are engaged, I suppose,” said Tom to himself, “or else she wouldn’t let him sit so near her, and glare at her so with those pig’s eyes of his. But I’ll never believe that she can care for a fellow like that. She’s just the kind of girl,” he went on mentally, “that, if I were a marrying man, I should like to win for myself—and, by Jove! he’s just the sort of fellow that I should glory in cutting out. Has he a word of any kind to say for himself, I wonder? At present his whole soul seems given up to the pleasures of the table.”

Certainly, Mr. Edward Cope was no Adonis; but he might have been accepted as a very tolerable representation of Bacchus clothed in modern evening dress. For a young man, he was abnormally stout. Already,

at three-and-twenty, he had no waist worth speaking of. What he would be ten years hence was a mystery. His dress was usually a compromise between that of a horse trainer and a gentleman. He turned his toes in when he walked, and he had a fat, vacuous face, which, in his case, was a fair index to the vacuous mind within. He was a crack whip, and a tolerable shot—pigeon shooting was his favourite pastime—but much farther than that his intellect did not carry him.

He did venture on a remark at last. "I gave Beauty a new set of shoes this morning," he said. "She didn't at all like having them put on, and kicked out furiously. Ferris did not half like the job, I can tell you ; especially after she sent him sprawling into a corner of his own smithy. I never laughed so much in my life before."

"I can't see what there was to laugh at, Edward. I hope the poor man was not much hurt."

"Oh, we got some brandy into him, and he came round all right in about ten minutes.

I'm going to try Beauty to-morrow in the new dog-cart. You might let me call for you about eleven."

"You may call for me, if you like, but only on one condition: that you drive me over to see how poor Ferris is getting on.

"All right. I'll call. But you women do make such a jolly fuss about nothing."

"What a beautiful sunset, is it not, Mr. Bristow?" said Jane, turning to Tom.

"Beautiful, indeed—for England; but in no wise comparable, in point of sheer splendour, to the sunsets of the East."

"From which, I presume, we may infer that you are not unacquainted with the East."

"Three months since I was living in the desert as the guest of an Arab scheik."

Jane brightened up in a moment. Here was a chance at last of hearing about something that would interest her. Question and answer followed each other in quick succession, and in less than five minutes the conversation had drifted away into regions far beyond the reach of Edward le Gros, who sat

glowering at them in a sulky silence, which remained unbroken till the cloth was drawn, and Miss Culpepper left the gentlemen to themselves.

“Draw up, boys—draw up closer,” said the squire. “Jenkins, bring in two bottles of the blue seal.”

Edward drew his chair up closer to the squire, who was totally unaware that everything among his guests was not on the pleasantest possible footing. Both the banker and his son had evidently determined to ignore Tom utterly, but Tom accepted his fate with unbroken serenity.

After a little time, the conversation turned on the probability of a new line of railway being made before long to connect Duxley with a certain manufacturing town about forty miles away. Mr. Culpepper was strongly opposed to the scheme, but Mr. Cope was rather inclined to view it with favour.

“One thing is quite clear,” said the banker. “Sir Harry Fulke will do his best to get the

bill smuggled through Parliament. The proposed line would just cut through the edge of his estate, and the money he would get for the land would be very useful to him just now—as I happen to know.”

“Pardon me,” interrupted Tom, “but if Sir Harry Fulke’s word is worth anything at all, he is as strongly opposed as Mr. Culpepper himself to the line in question.”

“And pray, sir,” asked the banker, with considerable hauteur, “may I be allowed to ask how you happen to know Sir Harry’s opinion on this important point?”

“Because I had it from Sir Harry’s own lips,” answered Tom, simply. “We were talking together on this very subject, only a few evenings ago, at Lord Tynedale’s.”

Mr. Cope stared at Tom as though he could hardly believe the evidence of his own senses.

“Ah, well,” said the squire, with a chuckle, “if Sir Harry’s opposed to the line, we may make our minds easy that we shall hear very little more about it.”

“I’m not so sure on that point,” answered

Tom. "I know for a fact that Bloggs and Hayling, the great engineers, are very much interested in getting the scheme pushed forward, and they are generally credited with knowing pretty well what they are about."

"As you seem, sir, to be on such intimate terms with Lord Tynedale," said the banker, with a sneer, "you can, perhaps, tell us the real ins and outs of that strange gambling transaction with which his lordship's youngest son was so recently mixed up."

"I cannot tell you the real facts of the case," answered Tom. "I presume that they are known only to the parties most concerned. But this I can tell you, that I and Mr. Cecil Drake, the young gentleman in question, lived together for three months in Algeria on the most intimate terms; and from my knowledge of him, I feel perfectly sure that his share of the transaction you allude to was that of a strictly honourable man."

The banker blew his nose violently. This Mr. Bristow was a very strange young man, he said to himself. There was evidently a

mistake somewhere. Probably the squire had blundered as usual. In the meantime, it might be just as well to be decently civil to him.

When the evening came to an end, and the banker was putting on his overcoat in the hall, he whispered in the squire's ear: "I suppose you know that your balance is seventy pounds overdrawn?"

The squire's face for a moment turned quite ghastly, and he clutched at a chair for support. He recovered himself with a laugh. "I knew it was very low, but I didn't know it was overdrawn," he whispered back. "But I know what I'm about, never fear. Just mark my words: before you are two months older, you'll have a bigger balance to the credit of Titus Culpepper than you've ever had yet. Oh yes, I know perfectly well what I'm about."

"I'm very glad to hear it, I'm sure," said the banker with a dubious cough. "I think we shall have some rain before morning. Good-night, Mr. Bristow. Very pleased to


have made your acquaintance. Hope we shall meet again."

The banker took counsel with himself as he was being driven home by his son. "I think it will be advisable to send Edward to New York for a couple of months," he thought. "In case the worst comes to the worst, the affair can then be broken off without scandal. The squire's playing some underhand game which will bring him to grief if he's not very, very careful. Meanwhile, all I can do is to wait and watch."

Strange to say, Tom Bristow's dreams that night were of Jane Culpepper. "I wonder whether she dreamed about me," he murmured to himself next morning as he was stropping his razor. "Not likely. And I was no better than a fool to dream about her."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT ALDER COTTAGE.

OM BRISTOW seldom let a day pass over without seeing Lionel Dering. Sometimes he accompanied Mr. Hoskyns to the prison, sometimes he went alone. The lawyer and he held many long consultations together as to the probable result of the trial. They could not conceal from themselves that there was grave cause for apprehension. The weight of circumstantial evidence that would be brought to bear against Lionel was almost overwhelming; while, on the other hand, not a single tittle of evidence was forthcoming which tended to implicate any other person. Notwithstanding all this, Tom was as morally convinced of his friend's

innocence as he was of his own existence Mr. Hoskyns, in his way, was equally positive. He felt sure that Lionel had not knowingly committed the crime, but he thought it possible that he might have done it in a fit of mental aberration, without retaining the least recollection of it afterwards. In the annals of criminal jurisprudence such cases are by no means unknown. And this was the supposition on which the eminent counsel whom he had retained for the trial seemed inclined to base his argument for the defence. Hoskyns had engaged a detective from Scotland Yard, and had left no stone unturned in his efforts to lift at least some portion of the dreadful weight of evidence from off his client's shoulders, but up to the present time all such efforts had been utterly in vain. That there might possibly be some foul conspiracy on foot to get rid of Lionel was an idea that for a little while found a lodging in the lawyer's mind. But in all the wide world, as far as he knew, there was only one person who would be benefited by the death of Lionel Dering.

That person was Kester St. George, and of evidence implicating him in the murder there was absolutely none. It was currently reported that he was lying seriously ill in London, which accounted for his not having been seen in Duxley since the day of the inquest.

The shock of his friend Osmond's dreadful death, taken in conjunction with the terrible accusation against his cousin, and the fact that he himself had been called upon to give evidence at the inquest, was considered by the gossips of the little town amply sufficient to account for Mr. St. George's illness. It was to be hoped that his health would be restored before the day appointed for his cousin's trial, he being one of the chief witnesses who would be called on that important occasion.

Tom Bristow was obliged to confess himself beaten, as Mr. Hoskyns had been beaten before him. There was a mystery about the case which he was totally unable to fathom. His conviction of his friend's innocence never wavered for a single moment, and yet when he asked himself: How came the jet stud into

Osmond's hand? How came the stains on Dering's shirt? he felt himself utterly unable to suggest any answer that would satisfy his own reason, or that would be likely to satisfy the reason of a judge and jury. It was very easy to say that Dering must be the victim of some foul conspiracy, but unless some proof, however faint, could be advanced of the existence of some such plot, his assertion would go for nothing, or merely be set down as the unwarranted utterance of a too partial friend.

Tom had not been half an hour in Lionel's company before he knew all about his friend's marriage, and next day he called on Edith with a note of introduction from her husband. Edith had heard so much, at different times, about Bristow, that she welcomed him with unfeigned gladness, and he, on his side, was deeply impressed with the sweet earnestness and womanly tenderness of her disposition. He was not long in perceiving that Edith altogether failed to realize the full measure of her husband's danger. She talked as if his acquittal were a matter that admitted of no

dispute ; and on one occasion, Tom found her busy sketching out the plan of a Continental tour for Lionel and herself on which they were to start the day after the trial should be over. It made Tom's heart ache to see how sanguine she was ; but, as yet, the necessity for undeceiving her had not arisen.

Mrs. Garside and Edith were living in quiet lodgings in a quiet part of the town. They had brought one servant with them—Martha Vince by name, from whom they had few or no secrets. Martha had been Edith's nurse, and had lived with her ever since, and hoped to stay with her till she died. To the world at large she seemed nothing more than a shrewd, hard-working, money-saving woman ; but Edith knew well the faithful and affectionate heart that beat behind the plain exterior of Martha Vince.

The life led by the two ladies was necessarily a very lonely one, and they had no wish that it should be otherwise. They never went out, except to the prison, or to take a walk for health's sake through the quiet fields at

the back of the town. They were always closely veiled when they went abroad, and to the people of Duxley their features were absolutely unknown. Mr. Hoskyns and Tom were their only visitors—their only friends in those dark hours of adversity.

“I am going to make a very singular request to-day,” said Tom one afternoon, when he called to see the ladies as usual. “It is to ask you to give up these very comfortable rooms and transfer yourselves and baggage to Alder Cottage, a pleasant little furnished house, not more than half a mile from here, which just now happens to be to let.”

“But my dear Mr. Bristow—” began Mrs. Garside.

“One moment, my dear Mrs. Garside,” interrupted Tom. “I have another request to make: that you will not at present ask me my reasons for counselling this removal. You shall have them in a week or ten days without asking. Can you trust me till then?”

“Implicitly,” answered Edith, with fervour. “When may we go and view our new home?”

“Now—to-morrow—any time. Only take the cottage, and don’t be more than a week before you are installed there.”

They were installed there in less than a week, despite Mrs. Garside’s mild protestations that she couldn’t, for the life of her, understand why that strange Mr. Bristow should want them to give up their comfortable apartments for a dull old house that looked for all the world as if it were haunted, and was built in such an out-of-the way place that to live there was really very little better than being buried alive. But Edith’s faith in Tom was not to be shaken. She felt sure that he would not have asked them to take up their quarters in Alder Cottage without having good reasons for proposing such a removal. What those reasons were she was naturally somewhat anxious to know, but she hid her impatience from Tom, and waited with smiling resignation till it should please him to tell her the secret which she felt sure was lying perdu in his brain. That there was a secret she could not doubt, because Tom had stipulated

that she should not even hint to Lionel that the change of residence had been instigated by him.

Tom was not at all like his usual self about this time. He was restless and uneasy, and seemed to have lost all relish for the ordinary avocations of his every-day life. There were days when he seemed as if he would give anything to get away from the company of his own thoughts, when he would hunt up some acquaintances of former years, whom he would invite to his rooms, and keep there with pressing hospitality till far into the small hours of morning. At other times he would lie on the sofa for hours together, brooding in darkness and solitude ; and his landlady, going in about midnight with a light, would find him lying there, broad awake, with a look in his eyes which told her that his thoughts were far away.

Strange to say, the person whom Tom Bristow most frequently invited to his rooms was Jabez Creede, Mr. Hoskyns' dissipated clerk. As already stated, Tom had known Creede

when he himself was a youth in the same office, but the two men were so dissimilar in every respect that that of itself did not seem sufficient to account for the intimacy which now existed between them—an intimacy which was evidently of Tom's own seeking.

Creede, whose life seemed to be one chronic round of debt and dissipation, would have been friendly with anybody who would have used him as Tom used him—who would have played cribbage with him so badly that he, Creede, always rose from the table a winner; and who would have treated him to unlimited supplies of tobacco, and innumerable glasses of Irish whiskey, hot and strong.

Tom would never allow Creede to leave his rooms till he was intoxicated, not that the latter ever seemed particularly anxious to go before that happy consummation was arrived at. But Tom was so abstemious a mortal himself that the fact of his encouraging Creede to drink to excess was somewhat singular. "What a beast the fellow is!" he muttered, as he watched Creede go staggering down the

street after one of their evenings together. "But he will answer my purpose better than any one else I could have chosen."

During the three weeks preceding Lionel's trial, Tom went to London about half-a-dozen times. He used to go up in the morning and come back in the evening. One morning he called at Alder Cottage on his way to the railway station. "I'm going up to town to-day," he said, "and while there I mean to buy and send you a certain article of furniture."

"Very thoughtful on your part, Mr. Bristow," said Edith with a smile. "But would you mind telling me what the article in question is?"

"It is a mahogany wardrobe, and it has been made to fit into the recess in your dressing-room."

"But I am not in want of a wardrobe, whether made of mahogany or any other wood," said Edith, with a puzzled look.

"That doesn't matter in the least. I shall buy it and send it all the same. The fact is I ordered it when I was in London a fort-

night ago. I got Martha Vince to give me the measurement of the recess in which I want it to be fixed."

Edith was mystified, but she had such implicit faith in Tom that she never demurred at anything he either said or did.

Two days later the wardrobe arrived. Tom in person had superintended its removal from the truck to the van at the railway station, and he was at Alder Cottage to receive it. The porters, by Tom's instructions, carried it as far as the landing upstairs, and there left it.

"It now remains to be unpacked," said Tom, "and then Martha and I, with Mrs. Dering's permission, will try to fix it in the corner it is intended to occupy."

"But why not have kept the railway men to unpack and fix it?" asked Mrs. Garside.

"Because there is a little secret connected with this wardrobe," answered Tom, "of which we four alone must possess the key."

"I like secrets," said Mrs. Garside. "It is so delightful to know something that nobody else knows."

So the wardrobe was unpacked, and proved to be a very handsome and substantial piece of furniture indeed. It tested their united strength to move it into the position it was to occupy, but when once there they found that it fitted the recess exactly.

"Now for the secret!" said Mrs. Garside, as she sat down panting on a chair.

"Suppose we adjourn downstairs," said Tom. "I have much to say to you."

His tone was very grave. The colour faded out of Edith's cheeks as he spoke. Her sensitive heart took alarm in a moment.

As soon as Mrs. Garside, Edith, and Tom had entered the parlour, Martha Vince discreetly shut the door upon them, and went back to her work in the kitchen.

"First of all," began Tom, "I must ask whether your servant, Martha Vince, has your entire confidence."

"My full and entire confidence," answered Edith, without a minute's hesitation. "There is no more faithful creature breathing."

"My own idea of her exactly," said Tom.

“Such being the case, it would be as well that she should hear what I have to say to you.”

So the bell was rung, and Martha was summoned to join the consultation in the parlour.

“Some of my proceedings must have appeared very strange to you, Mrs. Dering,” said Tom, addressing himself to Edith. “If, at times, I have seemed over-intrusive, I must claim your forgiveness on the score of my thorough disinterestedness. In all that I have done, I have been actuated by one motive only : that motive was the welfare of my dear friend, Lionel Dering.”

“I believe you, from my heart,” said Edith, earnestly. “But indeed, no such apology was needed—no apology at all.”

Mrs. Garside coughed a dubious little cough. Really, that strange Mr. Bristow was more strange than usual this afternoon.

“In all the affairs of this life,” went on Tom, “it is best never to expect too much : it is good to be prepared to face the worst.”

“Ah !” said Edith, with a quivering, long-

drawn sigh, "now I begin to understand you."

"The day fixed for Dering's trial is at hand: the weight of evidence against him is terribly strong: no human being can say what the result may be." He spoke very slowly and very gravely, and the faces of his listeners blanched as they heard him.

"And I—heaven help me!" faltered Edith, "was foolish enough to think that, because he is innocent, he could not fail to be acquitted!"

"Of his innocence we are all perfectly satisfied. But the jury will also have to be satisfied of it. And therein lies the difficulty. Unless some strong evidence in his favour be forthcoming at the trial, it is just possible—mind, I only say just possible—that—that—in short, that it may go somewhat hard with him."

"My darling child, this is indeed a dreadful revelation!" sobbed Mrs. Garside.

But Edith neither sobbed nor spoke. She sat perfectly still, with white, drawn face, and with staring, horror-full eyes, that, gazing

through the wide-open window, far away into the peaceful evening sky, seemed to see there some terrible vision of doom, unseen of all the others.

“Oh dear! dear!” cried Mrs. Garside, “what a pity it is that you would insist on getting married!”

The words roused Edith from her waking trance. “I thank heaven doubly now that I was enabled to become the wife of Lionel Dering! If—if I must indeed lose him, he will still be mine beyond the grave. Our parting will not be for long. We shall——” She could say no more. She rose hastily, and went to the window, and stood there till her composure had in some measure come back to her.

“You have something more to tell me, Mr. Bristow,” she said, as she went back to her chair after a little while.

“How sorry I am to have distressed you so much!” said Tom, with real feeling.

“Do not speak of that now, please. You have told me the truth, and I am grateful to

you for it. I have been living too long in a fool's paradise."

"But you must not give way to despair. Dering's case is by no means a hopeless one, and I should not have said what I have said to you this afternoon, had I not been compelled to do so by another and a most important reason."

Edith looked at him rather wearily, as if anything that he might now say could have only the faintest possible interest for her.

"As I said before," resumed Tom, "it is always wise to prepare for the worst, although that worst may possibly never come. And this was the object I had in view, firstly, when I induced you to leave your lodgings in Duxley and come to live in this lonely little house; and, secondly, when I had that piece of furniture made for you which we have just unpacked upstairs."

Edith's attention was keen enough now. "You speak in parables!" she said with pitiful eagerness.

"In one moment I will enlighten you," said

Tom. He leaned forward and spoke slowly and impressively, so that every word might be heard by his three auditors. "If I find that the result of the trial is likely to be adverse to Lionel Dering, it is my fixed intention to assist him to escape from prison, and to hide him from pursuit in this very house!"

Mrs. Garside and Martha sat staring at Tom when he had done speaking as though they believed him to be mad. Edith's heart gave a great sob in which hope, and joy, and fear were commingled.

"The first thing was to get you out of lodgings," resumed Tom. "While you were there, it would have been impossible for you to hide anybody. Fortunately, this house was to let. It is secluded, and not overlooked from the windows of any other house, and consequently admirably adapted for the purpose I have in view. But in the house itself it was necessary to find some special hiding-place—some nook that would be safe

from the prying eyes of the most acute and experienced police officer. Many were the hours I spent in cogitating over one scheme after another. The result was that I could think of no safer place in which to hide an escaped prisoner than my mahogany wardrobe."

"Hide him in a wardrobe!" exclaimed Mrs. Garside, in dismay. "Why, that would be one of the first places a police officer would look into."

"Precisely so," said Tom. "He might look into it a dozen times if he liked, and still he should not see all that it held. But we will go upstairs again, and the mystery shall be elucidated."

So they went upstairs again to Edith's dressing-room, and Tom flung wide open the doors of the wardrobe. The ladies had seen similar articles of furniture scores of times before, and this one seemed in nowise different from any other. There was a shelf near the top; and below the shelf were the usual pegs on which to hang articles of clothing: and that

was all. Disappointment was plainly visible on every face.

Tom smiled, and gave one of the brass pegs a downward pull. As he did so, they could hear the click of a little bolt as it shot back into its socket. Then the back of the wardrobe, from the shelf downwards, yielding to Tom's hand, opened slowly outwards on hidden hinges, disclosing, as it did so, a space sufficiently large for a man to stand upright in between itself—when shut—and the real back.

In order to illustrate thoroughly the use to which it was intended to put it, Tom stepped into the recess, and pulling the false back towards him, shut himself in. Seeing the wardrobe thus, no one would ever have suspected that anything was hidden in it. By pulling a ring, the person inside could open the door of his temporary prison, so that any one could step in and out at will, and almost as easily as if were simply going out of one room into another. Tom then explained the mechanism of the wardrobe, so that there could be no possible mistake should the

necessity for using it ever arise. The recess in which the wardrobe stood was a very deep one, and this it was which had first given him the idea of utilizing it in the way described.

"This is the place in which I intend to hide Lionel Dering," said Tom, as he shut the wardrobe doors, "should his innocence not be proved at his trial, and should I succeed in effecting his escape from Duxley gaol."

"But about his escape," said Mrs. Garside. "May I ask——" and then she stopped.

"Don't ask me anything at present, my dear madam," said Tom. "My scheme is hardly clear to my own mind as yet." Then, turning to Edith, he added, "But for all that, I hope that a day or two more will see it thoroughly perfected. Time enough then to trouble you with whatever other details it may be necessary for you to know."

"Some people say that the grand old days when Friendship was something more than an empty name are dead and gone for ever. I will never believe them when they tell me so in time to come."

So spoke Edith to Tom as they stood together for a moment at the door ere the latter took his leave.

“Dering saved my life,” answered Tom, simply. “But for his brave heart, and his strong arm, the hand you now clasp in yours, and the body to which it belongs, would be mouldering at the bottom of the sea, or else have been buried by strangers in some nameless grave. Can such a service be readily forgotten?”

As Tom was walking through the town towards his lodgings he overtook Hoskyns. They walked down the street together, talking about the trial, which was fixed for the following Monday. Mr. Baldry, the wine and spirit merchant, was standing at the door of his counting-house as they approached. Judging from the appearance of Mr. Baldry’s face, most people would have concluded that he was rather too fond of his own stock in trade, and most people would have been right in their supposition. Hoskyns stopped to

speak to him, and proffered his snuff-box as usual. Tom nodded to him.

"You can send me another dozen of that claret—the same as the last," said Hoskyns. "That is if you have any of it left in stock."

"I'll make an effort to find enough for an old friend," said Baldry, facetiously. "By-the-by," he added, "since how long a time is it that you have taken to rambling by moonlight along lonely country roads after ten o'clock at night?"

"I have not the remotest idea, Baldry, what you are talking about," said Hoskyns, a little stiffly.

"Oh, come now, among old friends that won't do, you know. Whether you're in love or not is best known to yourself. But it certainly did strike me as something out of the common way to see you walking all alone, between ten and eleven last night, under the lime trees on the Thornfield road."

"You speak in riddles," said Hoskyns. "I have not set foot on the Thornfield road for months."

Baldry stared at the lawyer, then rubbed his eyes, and then stared again. "Draw it mild, old friend," he said quietly. "Don't think for one moment that I want to pry into your private affairs, but I certainly thought there was no harm in my mentioning where I met you last night, especially as you seemed to make no secret of it yourself."

"I tell you again that I don't understand what you are driving at," said Hoskyns, testily. "I tell you again that I have not set foot on the Thornfield road for months."

"Look here," said Baldry, and an angry flush overspread his face, making it redder than before, "do you mean to stand there and tell me in cold blood that you didn't stop me on the Thornfield road last night, as I was driving home between ten and eleven? That you didn't shout out to me, 'Hullo, Baldry, is that you, old boy?' That I didn't stop the mare for five minutes, while we talked about the weather and such like? That you didn't offer me your box, and that I didn't take out of it a pinch of that identical snuff which no-

body but you in all Duxley makes use of? Do you mean to stand there and tell me all that?"

"Baldry," said Hoskyns, "for you to make such a statement as that is to prove that last night you must have been either crazy or drunk. Last night I never left the house after eight o'clock: as my servant could certify on oath. And as for the Thornfield road, I tell you once more that I have not set foot on it since last Christmas."

"Ned," shouted Baldry to some one inside, "come you here a minute."

The summons was responded to by a yellow-haired youth of sixteen.

"At what hour did I reach home last night?" asked Baldry.

"The clock had just struck eleven as you drove into the yard," answered Ned.

"Did I tell you, or did I not, that I had stopped and spoken to some one a few minutes previously?"

"You said that you had just parted from Lawyer Hoskyns. That you had had five

minutes' talk with him, and a pinch out of his box," answered the lad without a moment's hesitation.

"There! what did I tell you?" said Baldry, triumphantly.

"Baldry, I give you my word of honour," said Hoskyns, "that I was not out of the house after eight o'clock, and that I never met you yesterday at all—indeed, I've not seen you to speak to you for nearly a week."

"Evidently a case of mistaken identity," said Tom.

"Mistaken identity be hanged!" said the irate wine merchant. "How about the snuff-box? Could I be mistaken in that? Not likely. No—no. I respect old friends, but I'll take the evidence of my own senses in preference to any man's word, however long I've known him." And with these words, Baldry retired into the recesses of his countinghouse, and shut the door behind him with a bang.

Hoskyns and Tom resumed their walk down the street.

“An extraordinary circumstance, very,” said the lawyer. “I am quite at a loss how to explain it.”

“Baldry was always noted as being fond of his own spirits, wasn’t he?” asked Tom.

“He was indeed, poor man: and I am afraid the habit clings to him still. He must have been in liquor last evening. That is the only way in which I can account for his hallucination.”

END OF VOL. I.







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